make your bed (carrion's memory)
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make your bed (carrion's memory)

by miladiel

Summary

Only the dead have seen the end of war.
–George Santayana

They keep sayin' that I ain't nothin' like my father
But I'm the furthest thing from choir boys and altars
If you cross me, I'm just like my father
–Beyoncé, *DAUGHTER*

The war's done. Their plane crushes right on the East Coast. Buck is over it.

Notes

round two!! I promised you'd get the sequel and HERE WE ARE BABY!!!!

A few notes:
I'm not American. English is my second language. I also don't know how the Military works. You will get some gross misinformed bits in here because quite frankly, looking up stuff like "what did random ass American city xy look like in 1945" doesn't bear many results. I did my best. Just go along with it please.

Technically, you don't need to read the other part for this. It'll make sense regardless. It does recontextualise a few bits if you do decide to read the letters, but that's up to you.

I also never have upload schedules. The chapters will come as I fast or slow as I get to them. Uni is starting for me again in a week and I don't know how demanding my seminars will be

If you're a little startled at either how similar or how different Bucky describes things in the letters compared to how Buck views them, well, I never said they're reliable in their accounts ;)

Last but not least, thank you for all you lovely people who have been following the process of this! I couldn't ask for a kinder audience mwah mwah <3

Much love, and enjoy xx

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: PART I: Aftershocks

Gale knew something was wrong by the time the coast came into view. For a moment, he was utterly delighted at the sight of his country, stretching out under the clouds. They still had a few hours in the air left but they made it, alive and mostly unscathed. They were coming home as victors.

His excitement died quickly – first it was John, who had been suspiciously quiet for the entire journey. Gale didn't even know he could go silent for so long without popping a vessel. A glance at his sullen expression pulled his own mood down a notch. John in a bad mood was a hurricane that messed up everything around him and Gale really, *really* didn't want to start a fight. Then a familiar feeling ghosting over the back of his neck let him know something worse was about to ruin his day.

After that, the rest caught on quickly. It was the engines, rumbling too much, starting to smoke. In a matter of seconds, everyone on board was on high alert to prevent them crashing in the middle of the ocean. Gale grit his teeth. Not so close. Not now.

John perked up – *finally,* thank God – and immediately started snapping at him to get this thing landed somehow, preferably with them still alive by the end.

"I swear to God, Bucky, if you don't shut your mouth again right this second," Gale had bit back, cause honestly, the silence was starting to look a lot better than useless commentary. To the rest of the crew, he said, "We're gonna make it till mainland, you hear me? That's an order."

A series of tense *Yes, Sir's* echoed through the radio. John didn't seem convinced in the slightest.

"I don't know about you, cowboy, but this ain't looking too good for us."

"Don't you have at least a little faith in me?"

"No," John immediately deadpanned, tone imitating Gale's. He couldn't help his snort – staying cranky with Bucky next to him was hard. Damn near impossible, actually. Beneath their feet, the plane trembled. They were getting separated from the fleet, dropping in

height, concerned chatter coming through from the others. Gale tuned it out. He had a plane to land and about four other lives to punch through while he was at it.

“Aren’t you just a darling,” he said while steering them into a more stable position.

“Could y’all stop the flirting for a minute and focus on, I don’t know, making sure we’re not getting crushed by several tons of steel?” Lemmons’ irritated voice interrupted a question from what might’ve been Rosie a few miles ahead of them.

“Relax,” Gale said and grinned at John, who grinned back. “We’ve made it through worse.”

“This isn’t reassuring in the slightest, I hope you know that.”

“Hey, you’re the engineer,” John said. “We just fly this thing, I don’t need to know how it works.”

“That’s a lie and a bad one at that, Major. Croz, Douglass, say somethin’!”

Crosby sighed. “I’m trying to figure out a route here that’ll get us on solid ground, give me a minute.”

“Good boy,” John purred. “I was starting to fear you were throwing up again.”

Gale rolled his eyes at him in Crosby’s place. “Alright, fellas, let’s focus. I got somewhere to be and as lovely as it’s been, I don’t wanna drag this out longer than I need to.”

“Famous last words,” John teased.

Gale put his hands on his hips and looked at the smoking metal carcass in front of him. The sun was beating down on them. He could hear the waves crashing against the shore, the air tasting of salt, dry grass and sand brushing against his legs. A steady breeze brushed his hair away from his face.

Crosby managed to steer them to Massachusetts after Gale had pushed

them on against all advice, draining every last drop of fuel out of the tank to get them as close to HQs as possible. By the time they were preparing for the crash landing, they were more free falling than flying. Gale felt reminded of unbearably hot days in Algeria, waiting for their ticket back. Except there, they had a solid plan to wait on and weren't stranded on the beach with the Atlantic nipping at their heels.

"Well," John said next to him, "I guess we're just destined for adventure."

"I'd like to be destined for three warm meals a day and a soft bed for once," Gale grumbled and pushed his sunglasses back up his nose. Somewhere behind them, the rest of their crew was already strategising, trying to figure out how to go on from now. They had already tried radioing the next base to let them know what had happened, but the radio was too banged up to get the signal anywhere, even with Lemmon's quick fingers trying to salvage it. That left them on their own with an uncertain amount of days to cover. None of them packed enough food and water to survive on.

John nudged him with his elbow hard enough to make him sidestep. "Aw, don't be like that. We'll have *so* much fun!"

Gale wished he could share John's easy enthusiasm – only Germany had managed to dull it and now that they were out of there, it was back full force, making him bright like a tiny sun dropped on the earth to light up the world around him, golden and good and making Gale look for it wherever he went.

He'd miss it, months and years of getting to see that smile first thing in the morning, forcing him to keep moving when he felt like giving up. Deep down, Gale knew with certainty that if John hadn't been by his side, he wouldn't have made it this far. He still didn't know how he could ever thank him for– Well, being him. Prodding at Gale until he was forced to let him get under his skin, settle there, don't let go again.

His Bucky was insufferable, and unfortunately for Gale, he liked that best about him.

"Let's make sure we don't die of dehydration first," Gale said. Miraculously, none of them had sustained any injuries beyond a bruise here and a scrape there. That was a good sign. He hoped it was a good sign.

“You know, we should find the next town,” John said as they trudged over to the rest of the boys. “They’ll help us out – we’re heroes now.”

Crosby looked up from the map he had been frowning at. “Closest thing we got is Eastham. But we got forest to fight through. It could take us days if we get lost.”

“Well, that’s why we got the world’s best navigator to get us there safe and sound, don’t we?” John shrugged. Carefree as ever. Whatever had bothered him on the flight back, it was obviously gone from his mind. Like it had never been there in the first place and only a figment of Gale’s tired imagination.

“We don’t have another choice,” Gale chipped in. He didn’t like it but they couldn’t stay here, even when an entire fort crashing was quite the sight. If someone had seen them, betting on them to get here before the beach had killed them off was too risky.

No one argued with him – perks of rank and reputation. They gathered their things and what was left of them, left the equipment they didn’t need behind and started walking.

John had been whistling the same song for the past hour, occasionally switching it up with his horrible singing, when Gale decided he had enough and slapped him upside the head. “You sound like a dying crow,” he complained.

“It’s *too* quiet,” John whined. “I think I’m going insane.”

Gale shook his head. Unbelievable, that man. “You survived a POW camp and the march after and *this* is too much for you?”

A long finger got shoved into his face. “Now, that’s not nice, don’t bring that up.”

“Bucky, come on. You go insane *without* singing, the rest of us go insane *with* singing. Take one for the team, will you?”

“Oh, there he is, famous team player Gale Cleven!” To anyone else, his tone might’ve come off as malicious but Gale knew him well enough to understand that he really just needed to be distracted. All of them

had a long day and John sometimes let the exhaustion get to him before his brain could steer him back to a milder temper.

“Deep down you know I’d ruin you at baseball,” he said and didn’t push away the arm thrown over his shoulders. Through the gaps of the forest he could see the sun sinking, painting the sky orange and casting long shadows around them. Their footsteps were softened by the soil mixing with sand, vines and grasses sprouting from every crack. Spring had turned the forest into a sea of green filled with life that smelled of humus and pine, the ground covered by the needles.

“You don’t even know the rules. And you don’t like it.”

“I’m a quick study. Even quicker when I get to beat you at something.”

John clicked his tongue and turned to the other three trailing behind them without letting go of Gale. “See what I gotta deal with here, fellas? Day in and day out, this man’s just *thriving* on my suffering!”

“You thought it’s a good idea to marry yourself to him,” Lemmons shrugged. John with his loose tongue had told anyone and their mother the story of how Buck-and-Bucky came to be over the years, too many curious about it anyway not to. He loved to finish it off with, *well, what can I say? ‘S not everyday you and your wife get to fight in the war together,* like it was the funniest thing he had ever come up with. It was not, but Gale let him have the fun. The boys laughed at it everytime, so who was he to ruin it for them? “I say, actions have consequences.”

“Yeah, Bucky,” Gale smirked, “actions have consequences.”

“I’ll show you consequences, alright.”

“You stop believing in unicorns and then we’ll talk.”

John’s laughter was loud, even as he shoved Gale away from him.

They walked through most of the night, hungry and sleep deprived as soldiers usually were, grateful for the boots that didn’t leave their feet in blistered, freezing shambles. It was May but they were close enough

to the ocean to turn the nights colder than they liked, their sheepskin turned up to keep their ears warm.

Crosby's quiet instructions were the only sound outside of the rhythm of their steps, redirecting them every so often. Gale felt sorry for him – he had a son and a wife waiting for him and while he understood the second part, he didn't want to imagine what it was like, to be so close to your kid and too far, still.

He needed to write Marge first chance he got, let her know he was okay, just a little late.

He chewed on his toothpick and glanced over at Bucky dragging his feet and looking like he was about to fall asleep. They had fallen back a while ago, talking about nothing and everything until their jaws ached to keep themselves busy, but after a few hours, there was really nothing to share that they would want the others to know, too.

Gale was quickly annoyed by the fact that he couldn't really *talk* to John like he would when it was just the two of them. They had always found ways to have private conversations and he craved them, the blunt honesty they both had in common, that made them hand the things to each other they weren't supposed to.

Most of it had been the camp, he knew that much. Before that, he shared as little as possible, content to let John monologue and nod along sometimes, learning the very way he cut his nails and not really offering any information back. Then he had learned what it was like, to fear that Bucky was dead, leaving him in a world that was too cruel to bear alone, and it made him so grateful that when he did get him back, the words came easier than ever before.

Other men had wives for these kinds of talks, or pastors, or no one at all. He preferred Bucky, who lit up with every bit of information he received, to them all.

"We'll be there soon," he said quietly, trying to keep both their spirits somewhat kicking. They were still the ones in charge. If they faltered, the rest would too.

"Yeah," John murmured, eyes cast to the floor. "I think you were right about those meals and that bed."

Gale huffed out a laugh. "You already done adventuring?"

"Not a friend of forests, 's all."

He didn't elaborate and Gale didn't push. If Bucky wanted to talk about it, he would. His defeated tone did worry him a little, though – there weren't a lot of things that brought John to heel, and the sinking knowledge re-emerged that between Bremen and their reunion in the camp, the world had not been kind to him. He took care of his bruises, after all, washed away the dried blood on his face. Made sure his ribs would heal. He had seen first hand what his friend endured to get to him, and the memory alone made the hairs on his neck stand.

"Come on," he said with a lightness he didn't feel, "one foot in front of the other. You know how it goes."

Among soldiers, it was common to brush over the bad parts. The worst of it. They patted each other on the back, shoved whiskey into a shaking hand, and said, *chin up, you're still here,* like that could fill the glaring absence of those that were not. Gale had never been a friend of these rituals, even as he had repeated them over and over, at loss what else to do. They had no time to grieve, let alone process. The next mission was waiting. They were at war.

In a forest at the coast of Massachusetts he was made aware that what they had seen didn't go away if they only ignored it enough – it just waited until they couldn't run from it any longer, finding them, swallowing them.

He woke with a start, half a gasp on his lips he swallowed down before it could become a scream. Twilight grey surrounded him, long shadows and strange sounds reminding him of where he was, pine needles under his fingers when he curled them into a fist.

"Hey." John was crouching in front of him with bags under his eyes.

"Hey," Gale rasped back and sat up, rolling his stiff shoulders back. Sleeping against a tree was officially on his list of top five things to never do again. "You didn't watch me, did you?" He meant it to sound teasing but it came out insecure, searching for reassurance.

"Nah. Just heard you wake up. Thought I might check on you. 'S okay. We all have dreams." With his chin he pointed at the other three sleeping figures, half hidden in the dim light. All of them looked as tense as Gale felt, expressions scrunched up and twitching from time

to time, steady breaths interrupted by murmurs.

“I’m fine,” Gale said after a moment of observing them.

“I know.”

“You sleep at all?” They had decided to take a break somewhere around two in the morning, at least if he had calculated the difference correctly since his watch was still showing GMT. He had been fully prepared to not find any rest with timezone syndrome pulling at his internal clock but the entire day had been exhausting enough that he found himself dozing off the second he closed his eyes.

John straightened and offered him a hand that he took. His joints cracked as he got pulled to his feet. “Couldn’t. Someone had to keep watch.”

“Hm. Anything interesting?”

“Not even a squirrel.”

To get some feeling back into his legs, Gale took a few steps, wincing at the invisible pins jabbing at his muscles. “They got black bears, don’t they? I think one of my old teachers used to come here to hunt them.”

“Barely, and not this far east.” John conjured a pack of cigarettes out of some pocket and held it out to him. It was not often that Gale smoked but he pulled one out and put it between his lips, right in the corner where a toothpick would usually reside. He took the lighter from John after he had lit his own cigarette, clicking the flame to life, inhaling the rough smoke.

“Since when are you an expert on bear populations in Massachusetts?”

“I liked animals as a kid,” he replied, snatching the lighter Gale threw back at him out of the air. “Besides, I don’t think any bear will be happy with us as prey. We ain’t got nothing but skin and bones to get stuck in their teeth.”

Gale looked down at himself. Yeah, he could admit he had lost a couple of pounds during the war. He took a drag from the cigarette. The nicotine soothed his chronic headache but didn’t do anything to conceal the emptiness of his stomach with vertigo hitting him hard and fast. “Never thought I’d be grateful for not eating enough.”

“Don’t remind me. Croz got all our food, right?”

Gale took a few steps further into the woods to take piss, tucking the cigarette between his lips again. “I wouldn’t call those few crackers food necessarily.” A glance over his shoulder revealed John sneaking up on the sleeping Crosby. *“Don’t* steal them, Bucky.”

John faltered. Tracked his steps back, obnoxiously loud this time and really, it was a miracle he didn’t wake up anyone. Leaned against a tree with his arms crossed and narrowed his eyes at Gale.

“And *don’t* watch me, Christ.”

John only winked at him. “No need to be shy, it’s nothing I haven’t seen before.”

Gale grimaced as he pulled his zipper back up, quickly taking the cigarette back into his hand to avoid more smoke getting into his face. “That doesn’t mean I want you to–” he stopped abruptly, awfully aware of just how *stupid* this entire conversation was.

“Forget it,” he grumbled. “Let’s wake the others.”

By the time they were ready to get going, the sun had fully risen, a bright day ahead of them with few clouds and temperatures high enough to shed the jackets. Their breakfast consisted of the few chewy bars Crosby made sure to divide equally and a trail mix Douglass found in the depths of his backpack. A stream about thirty minutes away from where they had slept provided them with enough water to last them through the day, flasks usually filled with whiskey rinsed out and repurposed as water bottles.

John, instead of following suit, threw his head back and downed his liquor in three big gulps to all their dismay.

Gale could only watch him with a sigh. None of them had enough in their stomachs to really withstand alcohol but he didn’t try to stop him, knowing that if John wanted to be stupid, he would be stupid regardless of what Gale had to say about it.

John was different, he reminded himself. He wasn’t cruel. He wasn’t

mean. He barked a lot and had to be pulled back from fights he started more often than not but never, ever did he draw blood for the sake of bloodshed.

“Any of you know how to hunt?” John joked as they washed their faces and hair in the stream, the cold water running down to their chests and leaving a trail of goosebumps behind.

Lemmons shook his head at him. “I don’t know about you but I’m not very fond of getting blood all over my clothes.”

“It’s not so bad,” Gale said before he could think about it, only to be met with a surprised silence. When he glanced up, four pairs of eyes were staring at him.

“What?” he asked.

“How do you know that?” Douglass asked.

Well, shit. He sighed, finding Bucky’s raised eyebrows, half encouraging him, half making fun of him for tripping over his own feet. “Told you I’m from Casper,” he said slowly when it was clear they wouldn’t let him off the hook so easily. That was the problem with never talking about yourself – once you do, everyone’s lapping it up like it’s the last supper. “My father moved us there to get a foot in the oil industry. But we never had much, so he took me out with him to hunt, sell the meat or keep it for ourselves. I, uh, once I turned thirteen, he made me the butcher.”

“Ha! So you could chase down a nice dinner.” John was so fast with his gleeful response, he didn’t allow for any further prying. Gale was glad for it. It was hardly a unique story. Most people knew scarcity and most people had bad fathers. That was just the way of life.

“I was hoping by dinner we’d have a roof over our heads,” Douglass said with an expectant glance at Crosby.

He smiled back at him. “We should be there some time around lunch.”

“Oh, thank God,” Lemmons said. Gale silently agreed.

They were much slower than the day before, exhaustion tugging at them until they were dragging their feet over the forest floor, not even the birds chirping around them helping to lift their moods. John started singing again at some point and it almost made Lemmons

murder him with a stick, had Gale not stepped in. Surprisingly, Crosby and Douglass were moderately animated, pace steady where Gale and John had to push each other along, memories of Germany still too fresh, chatting about this and that while cross-checking their routes on their maps and compasses, quiet laughter speeding up their words.

Meanwhile, Gale was starting to understand Bucky's thing with forests. The sooner he was out of here, the better. He wasn't sure how many more trees he could take before going insane.

God, of course they had to be the idiots getting their asses kicked on the last metres. They survived the war, he was *so* close to getting home, back to Marge, but instead he was stuck stomping through East Massachusetts like a misplaced caveman.

Truth was, he missed Marge like he missed a cut off limb, the ghost of her at his side no matter where he went. She was his dearest friend, his confidant and lighthouse, the one person he could return to no matter what and know she'd still be there, with steady hands and bright eyes and the right words to keep him from falling.

She had saved him so many times and he still didn't know how he could ever repay her for it.

All he wanted was to see her again, make sure she was still real, and let her make him whole once more. He couldn't wait to move on, forget the war, shut everything–

Gale halted. His eyes found John's immediately, who frowned back at him.

"You okay, Major?" Lemmons asked.

He tried to reply but the words got stuck halfway in his throat. Whatever his face was doing, it unsettled John, made him take a step towards him with his hands in front of him like he was approaching a spooked horse.

"Buck?" he said, voice low.

If he forgot this war, he'd have to forget Bucky too. Would have to let go of him, watch him find bliss with friends less silent and a girl as bright as himself, and he'd be fine, would find his footing, but Gale–

Gale would be lost. It had not been Marge at his side during the war. It had been John, who had been there through it all and then some

more.

He swallowed hard and forced himself to keep walking. “You’ll call, right?” he asked as he passed John.

“What? Yeah, sure, I’ll– Buck, are you okay?” John matched his long strides instantly, falling into step next to him like they had never done anything else in their lives.

“Peachy,” Gale muttered and breathed through the stone that wouldn’t quite move in his chest. What kind of sick joke of the universe was this, that he couldn’t even move on without leaving something as precious as John Egan behind?

“We’re almost there. Just a bit longer, and–”

“I said I’m fine,” Gale growled. Knew that it affirmed the exact opposite and didn’t care.

John snapped his jaw shut. “Roger.”

The next two hours were spent in rigid silence, not even Crosby daring to interrupt it with his directions. Not that it mattered – before they knew it, they were crossing asphalt and soon after, the first few buildings came into view, little houses with american flags swaying in the soft breeze, neat gardens and clean cars, whole and simple. A collective sigh of relief moved through them, all tension forgotten.

“Do we just knock somewhere and ask them where the next pay phone is?” Douglass asked as they followed the road into the neighbourhood, drinking in the view of a town that was at peace, where children could play without worrying about the next air raid.

“Guess so,” John shrugged. “Maybe ask them for a place to stay, too.”

“Hey!” The five of them paused, turning around to see an old man leaning against his picket fence, a dog at his side that wagged its tail at them. “You’re soldiers.”

Gale's hand twitched with the ghost of a gun. The hostility they had been met with in countries that weren’t theirs was hard to forget. “Yeah,” he said eventually, raising his chin just in case.

The old man laughed, his hand patting the dog’s head absent-mindedly. “Isn’t that something? How’d you end up here?”

“Engine malfunction,” Gale offered. “We crashed at the beach.”

“What a shame. Well, why don’t you come in? You look five minutes away from meeting God in heaven.” Without another word he went back inside, the dog following dutifully, leaving the door open as a clear invitation.

John looked at Gale and Gale looked at John and they nodded at each other. Then they followed the old man. In the end, what other choice did they have?

Chapter 2: Pathways

Chapter Notes

> Buck thinks of himself as Gale, and Bucky thinks of himself as Bucky first and foremost as does everyone else, but Buck thinks of Bucky and John, you get me?
>
> WARNING: I DON'T KNOW WHAT BOSTON LOOKS LIKE. ESPECIALLY NOT IN 1945. This is purely based off of five photos i found on google and the Vibes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Bucky, you can’t just steal entire bottles of wine.”

John looked at Gale, guilty as charged with the half empty bottle raised to his lips, the dark red liquid inside sloshing around when he set it down on the porch he was sitting on, entirely disregarding the chairs and table right next to him. Some of it had stained his lips purple already and an uncomfortable memory crept up on Gale, of black-stained hands and a house that was never calm.

“He did say to make ourselves comfortable.”

Gale rolled his eyes and dropped down to his left, taking the wine and putting it as far away from them as he could from his position. “Have you eaten?”

John waved him off. “Not hungry.”

“Cause you’re drunk.”

Before John could start arguing with him, Gale got up and went back inside, taking the wine with him and discreetly putting it back on the kitchen counter where it belonged. Around the small table, Lemmons, Crosby and Douglass were entertaining Rupert, the old man that had taken them in, and his wife, Anna. They had been kind enough to prepare a hearty stew for them, some of which Gale poured into an untouched bowl.

He squeezed Crosby’s shoulder in passing and smiled at their hosts.

“Bucky?” Douglass asked while handing him a clean spoon from the table.

“He’ll manage,” Gale replied. To Anna he said, “I’m sorry about him.”

She assessed him with eyes that had a warm sternness to them, the gaze of a mother wise with experience. “Now, don’t you worry, boy. I had to send my own son off to one war and met my husband because of another one. You don’t have to explain.”

“Thank you,” he said earnestly and made his way back to the patio, where Bucky was staring off into the distance, nothing but trees and sand and more trees.

Gale handed him the stew. “Eat all of it or I’m gonna make you.”

Knowing better than to test him, John dutifully obliged and started shovelling the stew inside his mouth, spoon by spoon, swallowing every last bit. They had never been in a position to refuse any food and they wouldn’t start now.

When he was done, he put the bowl down and said, “You know what I wanna do when I get home?”

“I have yet to find the secret to mind reading.”

“Sign up to a poetry class.”

Gale frowned. While John did enjoy reading, it was mostly adventure novels and crime stories, – Agatha Christie, Graham Greene, Hemingway and Tolkien – indulgent like the Jazz clubs he was so fond of. Not for a second did he seem like the type to sit down with a T.S. Eliot collection and *enjoy* it. “Poetry? Have you fallen in love?”

A smile he had never seen before emerged on his friend’s face, mysterious and quiet and telling him a thousand things without saying anything at all. “Oh, you don’t know the half of it.”

Christ help him. John actually *was* in love. Or maybe he was just drunk. Whatever it was, Gale wished he could stop right now. “Bucky, I swear, if it’s one of the poor girls in England that had to deal with you day in and day out, I’ll–”

Bucky laughed so loud, he must’ve alerted the entire neighbourhood. “No, God! It’s not. It’s *not,* don’t look at me like that.”

“So who is it, then? Cause the list of potential victims is pretty short, even with Meatball included.”

“Ah, don’t you worry about that.”

Gale’s frown turned into a scowl. For all intents and purposes, John didn’t keep secrets, especially not about something like this and *especially* not from him. She either was a toad or the very Queen of England. “Alright, don’t tell me,” he said. “Write terrible poetry and plagiarise John Keats till you’re sick of it. I’m not gonna stop you.”

“Buck, c’mon. Don’t sulk.” Before he knew what was happening, John had lopped his arm through Gale’s and pulled him close to plant a wet kiss on his cheek. “You know you’ll always be my number one.”

Gale wrinkled his nose. Didn’t pull away cause Bucky got overly affectionate with liquor warming his blood and out of experience, he knew that trying to refuse him would only make it worse until they both were terribly upset. Besides, there were much worse things to endure. Still, he said, “you’re disgusting.”

“Now, sweetheart, you know that’s the wrong to say to me.”

“Bucky,” he said in a tone he only ever used with John, a low warning that couldn’t entirely rid itself of his amusement, urging him to step back and keep his foolish ways within reasonable bounds, save them both the embarrassment.

No matter how often the other boys joked about them being married, Gale was still no girl, and it wasn’t proper, to talk to him like he was.

John’s smile fell and he sat back, shoving a few inches of distance between them. “Sorry,” he mumbled and wiped his hands off on his pants like they were dirty.

“You’re drunk,” Gale said, trying to reassure him that it was okay, really, only to get a grunt in response.

John stood up, a little wobbly on his legs but batting Gale’s hands away when he tried to steady him. “Tell the others I’m taking a nap, will you?”

As he watched him stumble back inside, the gutting sensation overcame Gale that he had made some kind of mistake.

Anna was washing dishes with Crosby's help when Gale felt like it was inappropriate to stay outside any longer, Bucky's bowl in hand that he gently put next to the sink.

"So," Anna said and handed another dripping plate off to Crosby, "you're Buck, and he's Bucky?"

"Yes," Gale confirmed. He knew this would come up. It always did.

"Have you known each other for long?"

"A few years. Bucky named me after himself."

"He claims Buck reminds him of some fella in Wisconsin but really, it's a truth universally acknowledged that he just wanted to let everyone know that Buck's already got a partner in crime," Crosby added.

Anna laughed, the sound soft. "You've been sticking together this whole time? That's close to a miracle."

"We had a lotta luck." Gale did not look at Crosby, afraid of what he'd find there. Bubbles had not been as fortunate. He still couldn't shake the guilt for simply surviving where others hadn't.

"Well, it won't run out just yet. You go to sleep and wake up bright and early tomorrow and after breakfast, we'll figure out a way to get you where you belong."

One thing he had immediately appreciated about both Anna and Rupert was their lack of curiosity. Sure, they asked them who they were and what they did and what they called home but all information beyond that they didn't pry from them. It could be shared or it could stay inside them and they were happy to accept either. They wanted to help them get back on their feet, play Good Samaritan for a few days, and then move on with their quiet life.

"Thank you," Gale said again. "Really."

"You're welcome." She shooed Crosby away to take care of the rest of the kitchen. "If you want to shower, or just a change of clothes, really, my son was about your height." She pointed a wrinkled finger at Gale. "I didn't have time yet to clean out his closet. You all should find something. He just had a lot more meat on his bones, so you might want to keep your belts close."

Her voice didn't once crack under the loss that was a child gone and

Gale was amazed at how easy it seemed for her to talk about it, offering them remnants of her very own flesh and blood like he had just moved town and didn't write often enough.

Anna would've made a better soldier than a lot of good men he fought with.

"And should you need anything," she tagged on, "you know where the kitchen is."

Gale had to shove Bucky to the side to find his spot on the floor where the five of them had been given pillows and blankets to make themselves as comfortable as possible. The guest room was small with a bed that was barely big enough for one of them, and they had to sleep shoulder to shoulder to make everyone fit, with Lemmons right above their heads sprawled out far too gleefully as he watched them grumble and shift and push each other around. The dog also had decided their company was much better than that of his owners, which meant that now Gale had to fear his ribs would crush under the animal's weight on top of him.

"We would've eaten you at camp," he muttered when a wet snout settled against his neck. "Would've fed us for at least two weeks."

The dog whimpered. Gale ran a hand over thick, dark fur in apology.

"Good night, ladies," Lemmons said once the five of them were somewhat comfortable, minus John, of course, who was sleeping deep enough Gale was sure not even a horde of tigers attacking them could wake him.

At least he seemed untroubled. As long as he kept his wine-breath far away from Gale, he wouldn't complain.

Crosby and Douglass blew Lemmons a few kisses.

"Sweet dreams," Douglass said and killed the lights.

"You still breathing, Buck?" Lemmons nudged him with his foot.

"Ask me again in a few hours," Gale replied. At least they were fed and warm and freshly washed. At least they were alive. He really had

nothing to complain about.

“Well, if you’re gonna die, let us know.”

“Roger that.”

It was not the dog that woke him up, sweat-soaked and with not enough oxygen inside his lungs – It was the very distinct shape of a human body having taken over the animal’s place, flattening him, and Gale knew instantly who the culprit was.

“Off,” he grunted and tried shoving John away, which only made him tighten the arm he had around Gale’s torso.

“Bucky,” he hissed, trying again, and this time John had the grace to at least crack a bleary eye open.

“What?” He felt John’s voice more than he heard it, low in his chest.

Gale wedged a hand between them and started pushing John by his shoulder. “Get off me, you ape.”

To his horror, John’s eyes drifted shut again. “‘S comfortable.”

“I’m not comfortable. *Move.”*

A sound almost like a growl came from John, but he did what he was told, rolling over to his other side away from Gale, thank God, his breathing evening out almost immediately. Gale inhaled until his ribs ached. Exhaled slowly, evenly, trying to settle down again. Next to him, Crosby muttered something intelligible.

For breakfast, John was the first one up and happy to bully them downstairs, impersonating his and Gale’s old drill sergeant a little too well if it hadn’t been for his terribly exaggerated performance that made Lemmons laugh before his first coffee.

(Before that, while they were getting dressed, John had stolen a pair of jeans from the closet in the son's old bedroom, turned in the mirror and grinned satisfied despite the pants being too wide on him, declaring, *my ass has never looked better, actually,* and making them all groan in exasperation.)

Anna greeted them with toast and eggs and espresso, explaining that she had spent a few years of her early twenties in Italy to study there and hadn't been able to return to American black coffee ever since. While Gale felt a bit silly holding the tiny cup, he did appreciate the strong taste to wash the last bit of exhaustion away and focus on the day ahead.

"We need to get to Westover," he said after having emptied his plate. "Do you have a car we could borrow? Or know someone to get a car from?"

Rupert pushed his chair back and smiled crookedly. "Something like that. Come on."

John and Gale got up automatically, the other three content to let their leaders be leaders, following Rupert out of the house and into the garage. The walls were full of sketches and tools that Gale studied for a moment, amazed at the detail of the drawings, entire car engines made of thin pencil lines staring back at him, every last screw depicted exactly where it belonged.

"It's not much," Rupert said and pulled back a cover a few steps away from them, revealing a Douglas motorcycle in pristine condition, "but she was my son's, and I think you could make good use of her."

John let out a low whistle. "That's one beautiful bike."

A grin split Rupert's face. "She was his pride and joy." He grabbed a pencil from a small workbench to his right and jotted down an address on a piece of paper. "What you're gonna do," he said, "is drive to Boston to my old friend Mickey. You tell him I sent you, tell him to call me or else–" he winked at the two of them, "–and then ask him for a car. He'll get the bike back to me, and you can drive to your base and let 'em know to pick up the rest of you. Or get 'em yourself. Whatever you like best."

He handed the address to Gale, who took it with a grateful nod.

"Are you sure you're okay with them staying here? We can find—"

“I’m sure.” Rupert’s tone left no room for argument and Gale was grateful for it. Having to find new accommodation would be an expensive task he was glad to avoid.

John nudged him with his elbow, smiling. “Well, then it’s settled. Time for a little road trip.”

“Sure. But I’m driving.”

“You are *not* driving.”

“I am.”

“If you drive like you fly, Buck–”

“If *you* drive like you fly–”

Gale leaned forward over the front fork, his eyes watering behind his sunglasses from the wind whipping against his face. He sped up further until his hair was pressed flat against his skull, John behind him a solid line at his back, arms wound tight around him.

There had been no question whether they’d go together or not, despite Anna looking surprised when they had both packed their things.

“Oh, are you sure?” she had asked. “It’ll be uncomfortable, and I don’t mind keeping one more of you.”

“Ah, well, where he goes, I go,” John had replied with his most charming smile.

“And it’s less than a two hour drive,” Gale added. “We’ll be okay.”

Before they left, Gale had asked for a pen and some paper, leaning over the kitchen counter to write while Douglass and John bickered about sports behind him.

Marge,

I’ll be home before you know it. Please don’t worry.

Love,

Buck

He stared down at the note, the nickname at the end. To Marge, he was Gale, not Buck. But for some reason, it felt wrong to refer to himself in any other way.

Frustrated, he ran a hand over his face. Folded the note. Tucked it into the envelope Anna had given him.

Bucky truly did a number on him – had crept into every fibre of his being and refused to budge. How would he ever live another day without thinking of that stupid grin?

He tucked the letter into the inside of his sheepskin where he'd keep it until he could send it from Boston.

"Come on," he said to John, said goodbye to the others, thanked Anna and Rupert three more times for their hospitality and the food they had made them take with them. Promised that, yes, they would come back and yes, they'd hurry.

The bike felt good under him, purring as he manoeuvred it out of narrow streets onto wider roads and then the highway running through Eastham, the world flying past them in blurs of colours. By the time they had made it through most of the city, the sun was high and covered by clouds, the sky above them as grey as the sea.

Crosby had insisted on marking down the route for them in bright red, first from the outskirts of Eastham to Boston, Boston itself, and then from Boston to Westover Base. In total, he had handed John four maps, one just in case they lost the last, and Gale was a little insulted in how little trust he had in them. But then again, none of them had fun being stuck as they were and he understood the desire to get this over with as quickly as possible.

All of them had enough adventures behind them to last for a lifetime, despite what John might want to think.

Any other person might've told Gale that he was driving too fast, was risking running someone or themselves over, but Bucky was far too happy shouting over the wind, "you think you can go any faster?" and, well, Gale wasn't above proving that he, in fact, could.

He wound his way through the traffic when it did come, passing cars filled with families and workers and friends, narrowly avoiding crashing into one of them once or twice, which made John laugh for some absurd reason.

It wasn't as good as flying but it came damn close to the feeling and once they ultimately had to slow down as they drove through the towns and cities surrounding Boston, Gale felt a lot better than he had since they touched down on the beach.

"Keep this up and we'll be there in just over an hour." John had to speak directly into his ear so he could understand him.

"Don't curse it," Gale warned but it was too late – in front of them, cars were slowing down until they came to a full stop, a long line of vehicles stretching out in what was one hell of a traffic jam.

Even when Gale managed to snake past a portion of it, he had to stop at some point, close to the bridge where the cars were only inches away from bumping into each other.

"Damn it," John huffed as he sat back, arms disappearing from Gale's waist.

"It's early. We got time," Gale soothed, more out of instinct than actual sentiment.

To their right, three young women had rolled down the windows of their car, the radio adding to the general rumble of engines. One of them, a ginger with hazel eyes leaned out of the window with her cheek resting in the palm of her hand. A thin cigarette dangled from her fingers.

"I know those jackets. Y'all are pilots," she said without preamble. Her two friends turned to look over at them.

John tipped his invisible hat at her. "That we are."

"Air force?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Gale felt the need to lightly slap his calf on the side they couldn't see, remind him to tone it down, that they had to get somewhere and it didn't include anyone's beds but their own. Bucky, being Bucky, only winked at him and focused back on the girl.

“Well, what are soldiers like you doin’ here in Boston of all places? Comin’ home already?”

“We got a bit lost.” He sounded sheepish and Gale knew that it would make them like him more. He turned his head to the side, trying to tune them out, the giggles as John told them one of his stupid jokes, the familiar ebbs and flows of his voice as he launched into a story he had heard a million times before.

There, barely six feet away from him, roadkill lay unnoticed by them all – a deer rotting away on the side of the street, flies buzzing, the stench of it reaching him over that of gasoline, sickly sweet, and he stared, maggots crawling out of an eye socket. Legs that were clearly broken curled towards itself. Most of it looked deflated, eaten out from the inside first, fur sinking over a stomach that had nothing to hold anymore. He wondered if soldiers falling from German skies looked like that. If they were just as hollow.

A heavy hand landed on his shoulder, making him jerk back to whatever John was saying, something about letters and distance.

“Who’s Marge?” the red-haired girl asked, seemingly out of nowhere, and Gale hated her a little bit for it.

“His sweetheart, of course,” Bucky replied before he could. “An angel among men, I’m telling ya.”

If Gale didn’t know any better, he’d think John was trying to steal his fiancée.

“Oh, how adorable! You must be excited to see her again,” one of the other two girls, wearing a purple dress with long sleeves, said.

“Yeah,” Gale managed and tried to shake the ghost of the dead deer behind him.

John chuckled, shaking him a little with the grip he had on his arm. “Don’t mind him. He’s just got a hard shell. Now, me, I got something to bite, but Buck? Wouldn’t even kill a spider if I didn’t make him.”

Half that was a lie and half of it wasn’t and Gale rolled his eyes, placing his hands back around the handles as some of the cars inched forward, following suit. “Ah, Bucky, don’t fool yourself. You’re as sweet as sugar.”

Whatever his reaction to that was, it made the girls laugh again.

The traffic crawled forward until finally, it eased up enough for them to speed up again, John saluting the girls and their car with two fingers before assuming his position pressed against Gale again, the river as bleak as the sky as they crossed it. Just like that, they were in Boston. In his peripheral vision, buildings took shape and disappeared again a second later.

They pulled off the highway and had a brief fight about whether it was the right exit before Gale stopped in an empty parking spot to check Crosby's maps, only to verify that he was headed the correct way.

Boston was alive around them, the sidewalks crowded and the streets slow. Newspaper stands advertised the most recent headlines, shop signs glared at them from above, American flags and star-spangled decorations hung everywhere to celebrate the end of the war. The buildings were impossibly tall around them. A metro line weaved its way through the street-veins of the city, its cables tangling overhead with a million other ones, knots of them hanging from evenly spaced poles. Car horns blared through the air and seagulls answered with their cries. Occasionally, flocks of pigeons chased by children went up in the air in a cloud of feathers.

Gale, who had grown up in small towns with too many eyes and even more crosses, decided immediately that he disliked Boston, deeply. It was too loud. It stank. His eyes hurt from all the colours jumping at him from every corner.

"It's like the war didn't even exist," John observed after a few minutes of stopping at too many traffic lights.

Yeah. That. Was he supposed to be relieved about that? Cause he wasn't – it actually just pissed him off. He had killed so that these people could go on with their regular lives, and all they could do to thank him was hang up a few banners.

The only noticeable change was the absence of young men among the pedestrians but that was the new normal, he supposed, and he'd have to get used to it.

"Let's get that car and get out of here," he said.

"Maybe let's grab a bite to eat beforehand, since we're already here, but sure."

Rupert's address led them into the bowels of the city, away from

pristine buildings and into the neighbourhoods that looked in need of an overhaul five years ago, to a massive yard surrounded by a fence. Cars, new and so old they were covered in rust, filled up the entire space, the few gaps left revealing a muddy ground and different parts of hardware lying around. An old brick house replaced the fence as a border on the right side, one of the windows showing a sign. It read, **WILL'S GARAGE – OPEN.**

John got off the motorcycle first and ran a hand through his messed up curls. "Lovely."

Gale stretched his arms above his head. "As long as we get a working car."

Chapter End Notes

> RIP John Egan you would've LOVED Disney's Hercules. Not for any particular reason related to this chapter. He'd just fuck with the Muses hard

Chapter 3: Differences

Chapter Notes

> I feel like I need to say this because I write about catholicism like I want to become the first female pope (would that be madre then? Since in italian the pope is padre? That would kinda serve cunt ngl) but I'm not catholic in any way shape or form. I'm not even christian. I, in fact, have no respect for Christianity. The aesthetic just kinda goes hard and fits thematically so here we are
>
> also, just to make this clear, Marge is my girl. My woman. My wife, actually. I will not allow any slander you either stan her or you're wrong

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mickey was a beast of a man. He towered over Gale, grey overalls zipped down to reveal a stained undershirt, arms larger than his head. His face was made of deep lines with a big nose and small eyes and the only black left in his beard was the oil he smeared over it every time he touched his face without thinking.

Gale wondered why someone this imposing hadn't been drafted until he saw him walk with a limp, his left leg stiff like a plank of wood.

"Rupert, huh?" Mickey said after Gale had made their case. He wiped his hands off on an old rag. The brick house was his main workshop, a car he was tinkering on suspended in the air behind him and a belt stuffed with tools sitting around his hips. "Haven't heard of him in a while. He's doing okay, yeah? With Jim gone and all?"

"He's fine," Gale assured him.

"That's good. Well, I guess I do owe him." He turned around, walking further back into the workshop like he was searching for something. "I can fix something up for you. Will take a few days, though. Two or three maybe? Longer if I don't have access to certain stuff. War slowed production down."

Gale slapped John's hand away from fiddling with some part of an engine. Impatience tugged at him, begging him to tell Mickey to get it done now or not at all, but he knew not to look a gift horse in the mouth where it presented itself and this definitely wasn't an opportunity that would come again, and so he swallowed it down and

smiled through the acid on his tongue. “Thank you. Do you have a telephone, maybe, so we can let our friends know we haven’t abandoned them?”

Mickey pointed towards the wall, a small desk shoved against it and next to it, a phone covered in dust and grime. Gale grabbed it with a handkerchief around it and made quick work of dialling, letting the operator connect him to the right number, and waited a few seconds before a familiar voice said, “hello?”

“Lemmons,” Gale said and almost stumbled when John was suddenly all up in his space, trying to listen in on the conversation. *“Jesus,* John– Lemmons, how are you holding up?”

From the other side, he heard some shuffling. “We’re doing just fine, Major. Croz managed to contact the base earlier, to let ‘em know we’re on American soil.”

“Are they sending anyone to get you?”

“Yeah, but it’s gonna take longer than your plan. So you just go ahead and tell Bucky to leave some whiskey for the rest of us.”

John snorted, hot air ghosting over Gale’s neck, his chin coming to rest on his shoulder. “No guarantees. You better hurry.”

Gale rolled his eyes, even as a smile tugged at his lips. “Don’t get nervous. We won’t be able to leave for a few days.”

“Aw, you’ll get to explore Boston all without us.”

“I’ll mainly be busy making sure I don’t lose Bucky, so don’t go running around stirring up trouble while we’re gone.”

“How could we?” That was Crosby, voice muffled through the speaker. “You took all the trouble with you.”

“I’m starting to get offended,” John remarked.

“Oh, I meant the both of you. You know what the Colonel said when I called? ‘Egan and Cleven?’ he said, ‘well, good luck with those two devils, son.’ It’s true! You got a reputation!”

They did, didn’t they? He remembered the awed looks they got back in England all too well, how natural his authority had felt over there, and how comfortable he felt having it. Like he was born for leading a

few hundred men at a time into their deaths.

Up in the air or on the ground, no one had dared to question him. Except Bucky of course, who would smirk and narrow his eyes at him before letting him know just what an asshole he truly was.

“Well, you gotta make a name for yourself somehow,” John said.

Gale glanced at him out of the corner of his eyes, raising his brows. “When we leave this damned city, I don’t want anyone to know more about you than that you’re Catholic and a soldier.”

“They only see my cross and dog tags, though, when I take my–”

Mercifully, Lemmons cut the conversation, very much *not* interested in more of John’s locker-room talk, telling them to call if they had any important updates before he hung up and Gale and John were left to figure out what to do next.

First, Mickey handed them a small business card with a time scrawled on it when the car would be ready. He advised them to stay out of certain areas but only shrugged when they asked if he knew any hotels in the area they could stay in.

They left the motorcycle behind and decided to walk, John holding Crosby’s map out in front of him and squinting at it every so often. This part of town was a lot quieter, cars parked on the side of the road and a few dogs barking in the distance, their steps distinct on the cracked sidewalk. Small yards with grass and flowers in full bloom accompanied houses that all looked the same, white facades and porches and two windows pointed towards them. Beyond, the city slowly started to rise, the buildings growing in size until they became a fortress of a skyline.

“I don’t wear my cross anymore,” John said after a while, his eyes on the map, and Gale had expected a lot of things but not this.

“Did you lose your faith?” he asked, sounding more accusatory than he meant to.

A wry smile twisted John’s mouth. “Does that bother you?”

“I don’t know,” he answered honestly. Gale had never really considered not-believing. The sheer notion felt absurd. God was God, and he existed. He knew this because he went into a war and came out of it unscathed. “Does it bother *you?”*

“I don’t know.”

For a moment they were quiet, trying to sort their thoughts. Then John said, “He feels… It’s like he’s become cruel these days. Or maybe it’s just us.”

“All fathers are cruel sometimes. But that’s not ours to judge – they’re fathers and He’s God.”

“You think He still loves us? Even though–” he broke off. Made a vague gesture with his hand that could’ve referred to anything.

“I think He has to, or we couldn’t love Him back.”

While the answer didn’t seem to entirely satisfy John, he nodded, almost an air of relief smoothing out his brow.

Not for the first time, Gale wanted to ask him if he was okay. *Really* okay, not just acting like he was. He knew John. And he knew how sure-footed he was with everything he did, whether it was asking a dame for a dance or flying a suicide mission over Germany, so content with who he was and what he was capable of. But he had started to crack – something was weighing him down that wasn’t just snow and blood and the ghosts of men they didn’t remember all the names of. The first time he noticed was in the camp, rolling over in his bunk to see Bucky still awake, the cold seeping through thin walls and turning their breaths into clouds, sitting at the small table with a single candle lit, bent over it with a pencil in hand .

He would always insist that there was no one he could write to, who’d even miss him if he was gone. Gale knew better. Let him get away with it, anyway, just like he did now when all he asked was, “you didn’t throw it away, did you? If you’re not wearing your cross?”

“Tried. Couldn’t. Didn’t feel like something I should do.”

“No,” Gale agreed quietly, “it’s not.”

The receptionist smiled at them with all her teeth and red lipstick. “Do you want one or two rooms? Many are empty right now, you’re really free to choose.”

Gale mentally went over what little money they had left and knew they couldn't afford two separate rooms. "One, please. Two beds."

She hummed and scribbled something down, her blonde curls falling around her shoulders almost like Marge's always did. "Well, then I'll book you into #308, alright? Three nights?"

"Yes, thank you." They could always leave sooner. Gale hoped they would leave sooner.

"Then here you go." The key had a little bell attached to it that didn't chime. "Breakfast starts at six and ends at ten. We don't offer lunch but dinner is from six to nine. Anything else?"

"That's all."

The room turned out to be small, barely a few feet between the foot of one and the closet, the frame creaking when John threw himself onto the mattress. The beds were shoved against opposite walls, their sheets white with thin blue lines. Gale dumped his backpack on the ground and shed his jacket, running a hand through his hair. Sunlight streamed through a small window and painted a golden rectangle on the dark floorboards.

"I need a shower," he said and went into the bathroom. It was covered in green tiles from floor to ceiling, cut in the middle by tiles showing patterned paintings. The shower was barely big enough to comfortably move his arms, a cupboard next to it holding two towels for each person. Gale dumped his clothes on the sink and made quick work of washing off the day, the dust from the road and the smell of gasoline with cold water and a bar of soap he found in the cupboard.

When he was done, he rubbed most of the moisture out of his hair with the smaller towel, using the other to wind it around his waist.

With his hand on the door handle he paused. All his spare clothes were in his backpack, which was with John, and to get to it, he'd have to walk out there naked as the day he was born with only a towel to protect him.

Not that he'd never seen John nude before, and vice versa. It was inevitable – they were soldiers, and had survived a POW camp. But–

Gale shook his head. *No buts,* he chided himself. *Don't be stupid. It's just Bucky.*

Steeling himself, he went back into the room and focused on his backpack on the floor grabbing it with his back to John. The smell of smoke welcomed him, telling him exactly what he'd find if he turned around, and that was Bucky sprawled on the bed with a cigarette between his lips.

"At least open a window," he said as he pulled out socks and underwear and threw it next to the jeans he had been wearing and decided it wasn't worth the effort to change those, too.

"Forgot how quick you were," John mumbled and something in his voice made Gale look over his shoulder, finding eyes that were dark and narrowed in on him like John was about to jump him.

Nothing I haven't seen before, except he was acting like it was.

"Bucky?" Gale snapped his fingers at him.

John blinked, grey ash falling on his shirt. "Uh," he said. "Sorry."

Abruptly, he got up and moved over to the window, pushing it open like he was a thief in the night looking for an escape.

"Whatever it is that's happening here, stop it," Gale said, perplexed as he watched his best friend's stiff shoulders and restless fingers as they tapped and tapped the cigarette between them, flakes of ash ghosting through the air.

"I'm not doing anything," John protested immediately, though he still wasn't looking at him, studiously staring out the window instead.

Since he already had his back turned to him, Gale decided this was as good a moment as any to slip into his underwear and jeans, buckling his belt with a click. If he didn't know better, he would've thought he saw John flinch at the sound.

"Bucky," he prompted, hands on his hips. His dog tags were warm against his chest. Familiar. The cross on a shorter silver chain as light as a feather.

"John," he tried again when he got no reaction.

Still nothing. Gale clicked his tongue. "Jesus Christ, John Clarence Egan, will you just look at me?"

Irritation pulled at John's face. At least he finally turned to Gale. "You

know my middle name?"

"Yeah, I know your goddamn middle name. Now get it together, you're starting to freak me out."

John dropped his head with a small laugh before he could stop it, some of his light returning as he focused on the dog tags above Gale's heart, a mirror to his own. "I'm not sure my own sisters even remember that."

Gale lifted a shoulder in a shrug. "It was in your files when I talked to the colonel about your demotion."

"That's– Buck, that was *years* ago. And you did what? Read it upside down?"

"Not my fault you got a name as ugly as Clarence to distract me."

Finally, *finally,* John was full-on laughing, rigid posture melting, creases around his eyes that Gale had seen too many times to count.

"You know what we should do?" John said once he had calmed down, leaning against the wall next to the window and fiddling with his lighter. Ages ago, right around the time everyone started calling him Buck instead of Gale, one of the very first things he learned about John was his incapability to stand up straight. He always had to lean against something, cross an ankle over the other, sit down with one leg tucked under himself, slouch against the nearest wall. Drill sergeants made it a sport to hunt him down while they were on breaks to catch him slacking.

Gale pulled a shirt over his head, simple white cotton they had been given by the military before crossing the Atlantic for the first time. "What?"

He joined John, knocking their shoulders together and holding his palm out for the half-smoked cigarette. He made a point of blowing the smoke directly into John's face, receiving a slap to his arm for it.

"Take the scenic route," John said. "Get lost for a while. War's over, Buck, we're free. We can go wherever we like, be whoever we want to. Come back when we feel like it."

Immediately, Gale shook his head. "Who'd we even become?"

"Just– whoever. No responsibilities. No history."

“Bucky, be serious.” There was no ring on his finger yet but John hadn’t forgotten, had he? Gale was to be married soon. Settle down. Start a family. Live a better life than that of his parents and spend it earning his place in heaven.

But of course, John wanted to bolt, head in the clouds even when he wasn’t piloting a plane and not even a war could change that.

“I am! It’s not forever, just a few weeks to see the world a little–”

“We’ve seen quite enough of the world.” They were starting to argue, Gale could taste it sharpening his words, standing too close to John and watching the muscle in his jaw tick. A part of him wanted to step back, hold his hands up and tell John that they ought to get some rest and forget this conversation ever happened. A darker, nastier part of him that was pulsing thick grinned at him and wanted to find out just how long it’d take for John to break his nose. And maybe, just once, he wouldn’t resist.

“Yeah, before we bombed the shit out of it. You never wondered what it looks like from below, when we haven’t touched it?”

“No,” Gale said coldly.

John licked his teeth like a dog getting rid of last blood. He felt it, too, then. *“Right,”* he spat. “Let me guess, cause you got pretty Marge waiting on you?”

“Use that tone again when talking about her and I’ll–”

“You’ll do *what?”* John pushed himself off the wall to use every last inch of height he had on Gale to tower over him. “Come on, don’t be shy. Tell me exactly how Major Egan will defend his *wife.”*

Not once did a single world hold so much sheer contempt.

“You got a problem with her?” Gale didn’t have a habit of lying to himself – he was looking for a fight, his blood thrumming under his skin, the thrill of all-too familiar, quick adrenaline and the promise of pain, and he leaned in until they breathed the same air.

He had not been a peaceful child. Perhaps he hadn’t killed that boy, only forgotten to look him in the eye.

John had recognised it even before him, eyes alight with a challenge, an invitation. Half a smirk. Eyebrows raised. *I knew you’d snap.* “I do,

actually." The tip of a tongue swiping over a bottom lip. "But I don't think you're open to constructive criticism."

Maybe it was Gale who drew his fist back first. Maybe John pulled his feet out under him before that. It didn't really matter cause the result was the same, the two of them rolling over the floor and trying to swipe at each other, nails and teeth and elbows, banging their limbs green and blue on the furniture in their way before getting to hit each other.

Quickly, their breaths were hard and shallow, John with a punishing grip on Gale's hair and Gale closing a hand around John's neck.

"Let go," Gale bit out, the satisfaction he had hoped for disappearing the longer they went on and their movements grew sluggish, all excitement gone now that their bodies had decided to make them aware of the pain they inflicted onto each other.

"You let go," John demanded.

For a few seconds, the both of them were eerily still.

"On three?" John suggested then when it became clear any other suggestion would result in actual bloodshed.

If he could move his head, Gale would've nodded.

"Alright. One," John said.

"Two," Gale said.

"Three," they said simultaneously, shoving at each other hard and scrambling back, twisted clothing and red skin and tousled hair.

Gale forced a few deep breaths inside his lungs, trying to slow his heartbeat down. His entire body ached. He didn't feel *good* perhaps, but he did feel more settled. For now, at least.

"Fucking bastard, is what you are," John said into the sudden calm.

Gale closed his eyes and smiled, rubbing a hand over his hair to get rid of the tingling in his scalp. "Gotta take one to know one."

"Touché. You wanna get a drink? Bet they got some real good spots here."

"Nah. Someone needs to keep their head straight."

A foot landed against his calf in a lazy kick. “Suit yourself.”

Gale was still awake when John returned, stumbling into the hotel room with all the grace of a newborn foal on too-long legs. He watched his silhouette in the dark, mumbled curses reaching him when John checked his hip on one of the bed posts, clumsy hands pulling off a jacket, shoes, unbuckling a belt. All of it he dropped to the floor and then turned to get into bed, except it wasn’t the empty one on the other side of the room.

“Bucky, not this again,” Gale hissed when the mattress dipped under the weight of another body.

“I’m sad. Don’t be mean.” Whiskey-breath hit his nose as John tried to wiggle his way under Gale’s blankets, the bed frame groaning in protest.

“Girl didn’t let you get under her skirts?” Gale guessed and smacked his hands away. *“Don’t.* You have your own bed. *”*

“You don’t even know what a girl looks like without her skirts.” Where he found the clarity of mind to quib back without slurring every word Gale didn’t know but he also didn’t really appreciate it, either.

“Was she married this time?”

“You’re so stupid. ‘S not about a dame.”

Gale was so surprised that his defences faltered enough for John to yank the blanket out of Gale’s grip and throw it over himself, turning to his side so they were facing each other. John *did* look sad, the corners of his mouth turned down, a small crease between his brows and Gale hated that he wanted to press a thumb against it and smooth it away, the expression so foreign on John and simply *wrong.*

He kept his hands close to himself and made sure to stay very still. “So not a girl. Then what–”

“Let’s not– don’t.” John sounded strangled, and it was strange for him to interrupt Gale, drunk or not, when he was usually just content Gale

was talking at all. “It won’t last. Okay?”

Gale had no clue what he was talking about. “Sure. Can I have my bed back for myself now?”

As if to make a point, John threw an arm over his waist, literally manhandling Gale despite his vocal disapproval until his nose was buried in Gale’s neck and the lengths of their bodies were far, *far* too close. He made a few attempts to get out of the iron grip John had on him with no success and had to give up, the depressing reality of whatever this was catching up to him alongside the fact that he wouldn’t be able to do anything about it.

John was perhaps the most stubborn person ever put on God’s green earth. If he decided it was entirely appropriate to cuddle with Gale while he was too drunk to walk properly, then Gale had to find a way to deal with it.

“You’ll regret this in the morning,” he still warned, more out of principle than actual hope that it’d change John’s mind.

“I know,” John mumbled into his neck, words warm and lips moving against skin and *Christ,* what were they doing?

What would poor Marge think if she could see them like this?

“Goodnight, Buck,” John said. Soft curls brushed against the underside of Gale’s jaw, who resigned himself to his fate and put his arm around John’s shoulder to be more comfortable.

“Goodnight,” Gale replied and closed his eyes.

Sleep came surprisingly easy. John was a rock next to him, barely moving, and though Gale missed the freedom of movement, it wasn’t bad enough to keep him awake, finding himself dozing off to the steady breaths ghosting over his skin. After a while, it barely even felt strange.

Still, he woke up before sunrise, grey light and clouds in the sky promising a chilly day. Gale snapped his fingers over John’s ear before he dared to push him away, making sure he wouldn’t wake up, and then fought off the covers, movements slow and always watching for a

reaction.

He hoped – *prayed* – John had been drunk enough to forget this entire thing ever happened. They were better off pretending it didn't.

Gale almost admired John for it, how easy it was for him to just *do* things, intoxicated or stone-cold sober. He was about as American as it got, freedom before all, and not a single thought spent on consequences. Not once in his life had Gale managed to move through the world with that much comfort. There had always been his father and the priest and the crosses waiting for him above every door, in every corner.

He remembered Sunday Mass in sweltering heat, mosquitos buzzing, a droning voice reciting holy scripture, and hearing himself answer in the same dead tone. Daddy dearest standing next to him, hands folded, head down, swaying slightly on his feet and fresh whiskey burning inside his gut. He always took Gale to Mass, no matter what he did the night before. It was his way of trying to save Gale, he supposed, show him that they both had a Father to turn to and that that one was going to listen.

Sometimes, Gale would wonder if James Cleven knew it was already too late for him. That he could beg and scream and heaven still wouldn't want him.

God loved them all but Gale had to learn that not even He could save everyone.

He dressed quickly, shaved and sorted out his hair. The mirror revealed clusters of bruises blooming purple in various spots, some obvious while others made him wonder when John had managed to hit him there. A glance at his watch revealed he still had a little time until breakfast and he decided to spend it taking a walk, the fresh morning air raising goosebumps on his neck. With his hands tucked into the pockets of his sheepskin, he let his steps slow to a comfortable stroll the war had made him forget he was capable of. Barely anyone passed him, the city around him still asleep. A few streetlights were only now flickering off.

Boston didn't feel as suffocating like this.

When he got back, the smell of coffee lured him into the hotel's restaurant, a small breakfast buffet in the middle of it with round tables covered in white clothes scattered all over the room. He was alone, except for some staff that greeted him cheerily. Gale chose

some eggs and toast, eating quickly, taking two cups of black coffee with him back to his room, knowing John would be grateful.

As it turned out, John wasn't asleep but there was the distinct sound of someone gagging coming from the bathroom and Gale sighed, putting his cup down to take the other towards the source of the noise.

"Overdid it a little last night, huh?" he greeted a gloomy John kneeling on the floor in front of the toilet, head half stuck inside it, and barely finding the strength to flip him off.

"Very funny," John said right before more of his stomach's contents found themselves outside of his body.

Instinctively, Gale crouched down next to him and rubbed a hand over his back, the cup momentarily forgotten on the floor.

"You're okay," he muttered, feeling John's ribcage expand under his palm as he panted, small shudders raking through him. "You're gonna feel better after this."

"I'm never drinking again," John moaned and resurfaced long enough to let Gale catch the tears sitting in the corners of his eyes and how red his face was.

Gale pushed some of the sweaty hair out of his forehead. "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour."

"Oh my God." The most pitiful slap landed against his chest. "Don't quote the fuckin' Bible at me when I'm dyin'."

Gale snorted. "Usually, that's when people prefer to hear what God has to say." Carefully, he manoeuvred John to sit against the wall, long legs spread out and taking up almost the whole crammed space.

"Here." John accepted the coffee with a grateful nod, taking a careful sip and swallowing slowly, as if to get his stomach used to the idea again to keep things *inside*.

"I'd rather take some of King Gambrinus' advice right about now." Purple shadows sat under John's eyes and his cheeks looked hollow, a sad caricature of himself that reminded Gale too much of German winters.

He still smiled, cause Bucky was here with him despite everything, in

one piece, just a little miserable. “Maybe stick to that no-drinking vow for a little while. You remember anything?”

“Lotta singing and good whiskey.” John swallowed more coffee. “Is there a reason I woke up in your bed?”

Relief washed over him at the same time cold horror hit him, the full scale of just how incredibly inappropriate last night had been and how little he had done to stop it right in front of him to eat him alive.

He was smarter than this – or at least he was supposed to be.

How many times had he pushed John away? Gently redirected him, reminded him of his manners?

Why had he given in so easily last night?

“You couldn’t tell right and left apart. Had to switch sides,” Gale said, a strange guilt nipping at him that was so unlike the stones already on his shoulders. He didn’t remember ever lying to John before.

Maybe he was going mad after all.

A sigh left John, which only opened a pit in Gale’s chest, right where his heart sat – he had suspected what had happened, hadn’t he? How relieved he looked now that he could believe it didn’t.

“Oh, well. Sorry.”

“Just don’t do it again.”

John mock-saluted him. “Thanks for the coffee, by the way. You know how to make me feel less like death warmed up.”

Gale was glad for the easy escape. He got to his feet, desperate for his own coffee to soothe whatever it was that made him feel like he was the one that had just puked his guts out. “I didn’t serve years at your side for nothing. Go take a shower. We got nothing to do, anyway.”

“I mean, we could–”

“No.”

“I didn’t even–”

“No girls. No whiskey. You’re staying in bed today.”

John laughed at his back. “Aw, you want me all to yourself, don’t you? Well, there’s no way I can say no to that, is there?”

Gale’s neck didn’t prickle at the memory of an arm wound tightly around his waist. It did *not.*

Chapter End Notes

> RIP Gale Cleven you would’ve LOVED crying to the Cowboy Carter album. And Preacher’s Daughter

Chapter 4: Lessons

Chapter Notes

> i wanted this to have a completely different ending but i decided i had to upload it or i was gonna go insane so. here u go
>
> i don't like the pacing of this but point one still stands
>
> i want to thank @locallavendermenace on tumblr dearly for their generous help and answering any questions i have about massachussets!!!! without her, this would read a lot more bare-boned and i never would've found out MIT and Harvard are both, actually, in Boston
>
> i also want to thank each and every person for commenting, for leaving kudos, for yelling at me, for letting me yell at them, for literally writing fics inspired by this series which is still absolutely BONKERS to me and just generally all the lovely, lovely people gathered here to be really sad about a bit of american imperialist propaganda. i'm so full of love <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Most of Gale's earliest memories were connected to a deep-rooted sense of unshakable boredom. Small town, not enough kids – even when he tried to make friends, too many mothers knew about his drunk gambler of a daddy and pulled their sons back inside like his company would ruin them, leaving Gale to figure out how to entertain himself. To fill his days, he talked to the horses everywhere, closed his eyes and pulled five books from library shelves and read them all at once, learned how to do handstands and how to ride his bicycle without touching the handlebars, taught himself chess and did his homework like his life depended on good grades, learned reading sheet music, both treble and bass clefs, read the bible from front to back and back to front, and befriended every stray animal he could find.

Still, because he was a child, boredom would inevitably find him, making him stop in his tracks and put down whatever he was doing to realise that, actually, he did not like it. Then he would spend hours sitting around, kicking up dust, brain stuck on nothing and everything and immobilising him. Even his father would notice the mood shift, grabbing his face with dirty fingers and pulling it up to squint at him.

“The devil possess you?” he’d slur, voice deeper than Gale’s would ever get.

“No,” he’d reply, making sure not to mumble or look away.

“Good boy.” His father always patted his head, ruffling his hair, then went on with his day like Gale existed as an afterthought. That was how he remembered his father best: with his back turned to him.

Of course he left the first chance he got. The military was an easy way out. Leave his history behind and start with a blank slate, become a Gale Cleven that didn’t have the hands of his father to guide his own, that had so much to prove. There was no boredom in the army. From dusk to dawn they kept them busy with duty after duty, and Gale found it comforting, never in his life having so much to occupy him.

He got used to it too fast, and then there was war and he was Buck and Major Cleven and now, in a small hotel room with a hungover John trying his best to keep quiet as not to aggravate his own headache, Gale was confronted with a pit of frustration in his stomach he thought he had left behind.

John was the restless one of the two. Gale was supposed to be fine with doing nothing. He had spent months like that and even worse, but he had the disquieting suspicion that back in the camp, he at least had hunger to fight and men that sought his approval. Here, he only had John, and there had never been a moment where either of them tried to prove anything to each other. Not since they had become Buck-and-Bucky.

Where you go, I go, John liked to say, and it was all anyone ever had to know about them, really. There was nothing more to it. Whether it was a POW camp or Boston, they always fought their way through together.

“Buck,” John’s rasping voice wafted over to him at some point, when he wouldn’t stop tapping his nails against the cover of the book he pretended to read, except he hadn’t flipped a page for the last twenty minutes.

“Hm?”

“Buck, if you don’t stop that, I’ll have to hit you.”

He tried to find a sentence on the page that didn’t leave him completely scratching his head as to where in the story he was.

“Sorry.”

John rolled over in his bed, narrowing his eyes at him. “Are you bored?”

“No.”

“You definitely are.”

“I’m not.”

“Right.”

“Don’t even know what that means.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Never heard of being bored.”

“Sure.”

“I’ve actually never been more entertained.”

“Buck?”

“What?”

A little ungraceful, John set his feet on the floor and pushed himself up, almost managing to hide his grimace at the sudden change. “Let’s go.”

“Where to?”

“We’re going out.” He reached for Gale’s jacket and threw it his way before searching for his own jeans on the floor.

Gale caught the sheepskin before it could hit him in the face. “We’re not.”

“You’re bored, I’m bored, so we’re going out.” John almost fell over when he couldn’t find the second leg of his pants, hopping around like he was stepping on hot coals.

Gale reached out to steady him. “You need to rest.”

“I almost started hibernating, that’s how much I rested.”

“You know words with more than six letters?” The pen hauled at his

forehead might have been deserved.

“I *do* read, you know. Now come on, I’m getting hungry.”

One boot landed on his thigh, the second one following a moment later. *“Stop* throwing things at me.”

“Then get up. Or do you want me to carry you? Cause I’ll do it. Don’t try me.”

Not once in his life had Gale been on his feet this fast.

They found a bar not too far from the hotel that John swore wasn’t the one he had been at the night before and when the bartender didn’t do more than glance at them with a curt greeting, Gale was inclined to believe him. It was barely more than a hole in the wall, the air perpetually blurred with smoke, bad beer and worse conversation, the few patrons seated around them on wobbly chairs all staring at the two of them like vultures spotting a fresh corpse.

Gale ordered coke for both of them, cold in his hand when it came alongside a small glass with salted peanuts inside.

“You think they’re worried about us?” John asked after taking a sip and almost managing not to complain about the lack of booze.

“At the base? They got the end of the war to celebrate.”

“Eh, I'm telling ya, Rosie and Crank are gossipin' ‘bout all our worst secrets.”

Gale smiled around the mouth of the bottle. “You’ll charm yourself back into their good graces soon enough.”

“‘S not my fault I’m naturally alluring.”

“I was thinking more along the lines of pushy, but sure.”

John threw a peanut at his head. “Don’t you ever get tired of pulling on my metaphorical pigtails? It doesn’t make me like you more, you know.”

His fingers twitched to throw a peanut back but he kept his hand resting on the table, refusing to indulge in something so childish. “It’s nothing personal.”

“Oh, yeah? I’ve never heard you be a shit to Croz. Or Douglass. Or literally anyone else.”

“I’m not–” the laugh came unbidden, almost choking him. “I’m just messing with you, Bucky. Let a man have his fun.”

“You have an odd taste in what constitutes as *fun.”*

“What, like yours is better?”

“Uh, yeah.” John crossed his arms. “I’m a sensitive soul. You can’t treat me like that. I’ll tell Chick.”

“You can’t pull rank on me.”

A shit-eating grin replaced John’s pout and he leaned back, satisfied like a fat cat in the sun. “Don’t need to, sweetheart. Colonel Flesh-and-Brains *loves* me.”

That he did. Harding, as strict as he appeared at first, had a real soft spot for the troublemakers the 100th was made of. He let them drink and fight and scream at each other as much as they needed to, to stomach getting on a plane the next day. Once, maybe a few weeks after he took over, he had looked John and him over and said with a nod, *guess I can learn a thing or two from you,* and hadn’t waited for their confusion to settle before dropping into a chair to pester them with all kinds of questions about the soldiers under their care.

John and Chick had hit it off like powder and fuse. Gale could only put his head in his hands and thank himself for getting John demoted.

“I’m sure he’s crying into his pillow right now cause you’re not there to be a pain in the ass.”

His grin turned playful, almost flirtatious – at least it would’ve been if Gale had been a girl, he was sure of that much – and he looked him up and down. There it was, that famous John Egan charm brought on so strongly it almost turned volatile. Not for the first time Gale wanted to know what the hell Bucky was thinking when he tried using it on him, or on the other boys, like it’d get him anywhere.

John had actually gotten slapped for it before, by a girl in England in some pub that fled Eastern Europe and didn't take one word of sugar-coated bullshit out of his mouth seriously and Gale still thought very fondly of her for it, even when she had caved in at the end.

She was the kind of woman John needed – headstrong and maybe a little cold, willing to put him into place, someone he could chase and labour at and find that it actually worked, to both their surprise.

"I think you're projecting," he said. "Don't worry, you got me all for yourself for a while yet. And hey, you don't even need to worry 'bout after. No more Germans to whisk me away first."

Gale rolled his eyes, even though he had long stopped trying to suppress his smile entirely. "As long as you show up to the wedding ."

It was a crack so small, he never would've noticed it if he had been anyone else: John… faltered. Quietly, softly, but there nonetheless, his smile flat and his eyes devoid of any real spark.

"What? What did I say?"

"Nothin'." John shifted in his seat. Uncomfortable. Reluctant. Gale had never seen him like this before, outside of Kraut territory.

He frowned. "Don't do that."

John raked a hand through his curls and sighed. "You want the truth? It's strange. I– we've spent years in this war and now I'm just supposed to go on with my life like it didn't happen?" A muscle in his jaw ticked. He really looked exactly like he had during the last months in the camp, on edge and unhappy and Gale felt himself responding to it with a sense of unease that he thought he'd never experience again. "And you make it look so easy, and it makes me feel like I'm missing something ." He lowered his head, and he bled out, until all that was left was a frightened little boy. "Buck, what if I– what if this is all I'll get to be? What if that war took me beyond return? I feel like– I don't feel *good* anymore."

Gale grabbed his hands across the table and squeezed, trying to treasure the warmth in them, how it meant they both were alive and got to try again. "You *are* good, John. You are." He knew this as he knew the stars in the night sky. He had to, or there was nothing left. "You're the very best of them, you hear me? That's the God's honest truth."

Squeezing his eyes shut, Bucky leaned forward, his forehead pressed to their joint hands, and it was like the old women at church bent over their rosaries, whispering ancient prayers.

“Same rib,” Bucky murmured.

“What?”

“You and I,” he said a little louder, brows creasing against Gale’s fingers. “Same rib. You keep me.”

There was a word missing there and Gale’s brain immediately tried to fill it – you keep me safe? Sane? Here? But whatever the right answer was, he understood. He felt the same. Without Bucky, he would’ve drifted off long ago.

“You’ll always be my best friend,” Gale said. “Nothing in the world could change that. You know that, right?”

“Yeah. Yeah, of course I know that.”

The rest of the night, John was unusually subdued, even declining when a girl tried to chat him up, his eyes searching the world around them without pause like he was seeing it for the first time and his leg kept bouncing under the table, and Gale didn’t tell him to man up cause he knew it was pointless. If war had taught him anything it was that sometimes, when the small pockets of time between missions allowed it, they had to be left sitting with their emotions until they were ready to look for greener pastures.

It wasn’t forever. Nothing ever was. John would get up again, like he always did.

The next day, John proved him right by suggesting they go explore the city while they were already here and while Gale wasn’t exactly excited, he agreed. It wasn’t like they had anything better to do.

Somehow, they found themselves in Cambridge, and soon strolled through Harvard Yard, trees spreading out over green grass claimed by students sitting together in small groups. They wore suits more expensive than any Sunday bests Gale had ever owned, leaning back

and staining them without a care in the world. It was only a handful, though, the war having decimated the numbers of men attending university without mercy. Not that it was a lot in the first place, but it was almost depressing to see just how few of them had lasted.

“If you shook their hands, they’d be as soft as a baby’s ass,” John said as he studied the young men. Gale hummed in agreement – they probably wouldn’t know what to do with a screwdriver even if it gained sentience and started explaining itself.

“Best and brightest of the country,” he said sarcastically.

“And with enough coin to make you believe it.”

Radcliffe, on the other hand, had a lot more students to offer, mostly because it was all women. Of course John insisted on checking it out, a short walk across Cambridge Common dropping them off right on Radcliffe Yard, where young women were spending their time between lectures lounging just like their male counterparts, except they were smart enough to spread jackets out under them, to save their dresses from getting dirty.

Some – and Gale found this absolutely remarkable – were wearing suits.

Where he came from, women were homemakers, never to be seen in anything but skirts and dresses. His father had left the life of a farmer behind so his mother wasn’t obligated to do strenuous work, instead focusing on raising Gale into somewhat of an upstanding man and making sure that no matter how much money they lost, there would always be some left to get them through the month.

He remembered Marge back in school, who had fought tooth and nail to get any education beyond that of elementary school. While she rarely engaged in conflict, ever the peacemaker and negotiator, this she never had a problem arguing about, no matter how much people would talk about the shrew that made her poor daddy’s life hell – so much so that she wouldn’t let *him* drop out when all he wanted to do was find work and support his mother.

For some time, he had hated Marge for her insistence, convinced that she had grown up too protected to see his side, but she was right, in the end, like she was about most things.

He’d have to tell her about these women’s colleges, if she didn’t know about them already. She’d love it. If she wanted to go, and he was

sure she'd want to, he'd make it possible.

"Look!" John nudged him, redirecting his gaze to a group a little to the side, running around and laughing as they played a game Gale couldn't quite make out, except that it involved throwing a ball very far and running as fast as possible after. "They're playing baseball. Or well, a simplified version."

Gale knew immediately where this was going and shook his head. "Leave the girls be."

But John was already striding towards them, calling out to get their attention. The girls paused, some curious while a few looked outright disgusted by being interrupted by a fella, making Gale smirk around his toothpick, and listened to whatever John was telling them. He followed slowly, tucking his hands inside his pockets.

"Sorry, who are you?" one of the girls asked, with a wide face and tall enough to almost meet Gale's eyes without having to tilt her head up.

"John Egan," John said with a sweet little smile that made even a block of ice want to warm up. "But everyone calls me Bucky. And this is Buck."

Gale nodded at the group. "Ladies."

"Bucky and Buck?" another girl asked, giggling. Her hair stopped right above her shoulders. "That's silly, how'd you come up with that?"

Gale categorically tuned out the following story, having grown tired of rehashing the name situation over and over again. They were Buck-and-Bucky. Why did everyone always insist on questioning *why?*

At least it made them more willing to let John join their game, quickly explaining the rules before tossing the ball at him. He'd be in the running team first, trying to complete a full lap as quickly as possible while the other team was busy catching the ball he launched into the air and bringing it back into the middle of the field.

Gale declined politely when they asked him if he wanted to join the catching team, content to sit down on a nearby bench and watch.

It was a little unfair, really, to let John play with them. His legs were longer and his body stronger, the first ball he threw going so far he was long done running by the time the girls had returned it. He grinned, satisfied and a little apologetic, hands on his hips while he

waited for the rest of his team to progress much slower.

The girls were good sports about it. They patted him on the shoulder and indulged him showing off, laughing when he ran backwards the next time it was his turn to throw the ball, slowing himself down. Gale moved the toothpick from one corner of his mouth to the other and smiled to himself.

“Start losing a little, will you?” he called. “This ain’t the gentleman’s way.”

John winked at him. “Well, too bad I’m a true American soldier. I don’t know how to lose.”

“We can hold our own, thank you very much,” one of the girls said, not unkindly but with enough bite to let him know she’d appreciate him keeping his mouth shut. Gale obliged. These were *definitely* not the women he had grown up with.

They played a few more rounds, Gale more distracted watching the rest of the student body than cheer John on, until he threw himself onto the bank next to Gale. He was panting, his face red and sweaty and split by the biggest grin, his jacket in one hand while his other searched it for his cigarettes.

“These girls ain’t as fast but they sure know how to keep you on your toes,” John said.

Gale shook his head fondly at him. “Two days of good food and you’re jumpin’ around like a bunny on snow.”

“I gotta enjoy it while it lasts, don’t I?” The familiar click of a lighter, and John was blowing out smoke on his next exhale.

“You’re gonna have a whole lot of this now that the sky’s not waiting for us to set it on fire.”

Closing his eyes, John rested the base of his skull on the back of the bench, almost slipping off with how far he had scooted forward. Gale thought they must make an odd pair to passers-by – him, while his back not as straight as a pencil, definitely holding on to a more proper posture, and John, lounging like he was at home anywhere he went. “Yeah, but it’s not the same.”

“Would be strange if it was.”

“Guess so.”

They were both skirting around the same conclusion but Gale didn’t know how to properly put it into words, didn’t know how to express the strange sensation that overcame him when he thought of what would come after – which had turned into *now* , all of a sudden – and what they would have to leave behind. He didn’t want to call it nostalgia. He had no lingering affection towards the last few years of his life.

But Gale knew his creators and it was God and it was War and both had started looking an awful lot like John.

“You really wanna take that poetry class?” Gale asked, changing the topic swiftly without warning, to stop his mind before it could run away from him.

John opened his eyes again to glance at him. “Yeah.”

“I just don’t get why you won’t tell me–”

“It’s not about love,” he interrupted him quietly. He sighed. Turned his head so Gale couldn’t read his face. “Or at least I don’t think it is. I don’t know. It’s– every time there’s a funeral, and you write a card, and you need to say something, the easiest thing to do is quote a poem. Pick something nice from two centuries ago that still feels– right.” The more he spoke, the farther away he sounded. “And I just keep thinking, if you can write about death two hundred years ago and people still understand it today, then– then you can make them understand war, too. And I need someone, who’s not you or Croz or Rosie or any of the others who got out, I need them to tell me that this war stuck inside me, it won’t break me.”

For a few moments both of them just tried to swallow the words now that they were out there, hanging between them, settling like stones. He understood, and he wished he didn’t – no matter what they said, it would never be enough to patch up the wounds they couldn’t see. He could comfort John as much as he wanted, tell him that he was the brightest and bravest man he had ever met, that there was no one in this world he was more grateful to have at his side, and it would be true, and it would only put a strip of gauze on a bullet hole tearing through flesh and bone and organs.

Gale reached out to loop a hand around John’s wrist, pull his attention back to him, trace a thumb along a pulse that was stuttering and stumbling, press down on it, like he could make it pause long enough

to take a breath. “You think poetry’s gonna do it?”

John chewed on his lower lip. He didn’t pull away from the touch. “I– I don’t know. But I think it’s worth a try. Right?”

“It won’t save you, you know.”

“I don’t need that.” A tiny, sad smile pulled at his mouth. “Not that.”

The girls were still cheering as they played. Birds were singing in the trees. A breeze moved the grass to their feet, carrying the sound of laughter with it.

Gale was too focused trying to decipher the new secrets hiding behind John’s eyes to notice any of it.

His feet were sore by the time they made it back, and he was ready to fall into bed even before they had dinner. After Cambridge, they had taken a bus to the North End to wander past cafés and more Italian restaurants than Gale had ever seen in his life, and almost went to Faneuil Hall if they hadn’t gotten distracted by a bookstore tucked away in an alley, riffling through the many shelves and pulling out anything that caught their attention like they were children again, throwing titles that made them laugh at each other every once in a while and volumes they had already read, though it became clear very quickly that Gale had a much broader catalogue under his belt.

At a corner store Gale bought today’s newspaper while John insisted on getting a bar of chocolate that was way too expensive but he couldn’t talk him out of. John devoured the entire thing before they made it back to the hotel, breaking off piece after piece without pause.

“Don’t choke,” Gale warned him and received a non-committal grunt in response.

Once they had kicked off their boots, John was quick to lean against the window sill, watching the street down below with his last cigarette of the day between his lips (or so he said, which Gale had reasonable doubts about), while Gale was already in bed, reading through the newspaper. He never knew what he was really looking

for. The sports section he generally ignored, he had never been interested enough in politics, the feuilletons had nothing new to say, just like the arts.

It seemed like the world had come to a standstill.

He knew this wasn't actually true. He only needed to open a newspaper, look at the headlines, and maybe that was why he did it, every day, again and again, to try and prove himself wrong. What did it matter, though? The entire globe had been in conflict. Now it was over. There was no other story to tell.

Gale put the paper aside and rolled onto his side, face to the wall. Tomorrow would be the last day before they could pick up the car. Then it was only a four to five hour drive, waiting until the paperwork was through and they were officially done with this war.

He'd go back home. Hope had blossomed inside his chest every time he pictured it but now his heart tied itself up, the image of a normal life too far away from him to grasp properly anymore.

Maybe John was right. Maybe he would always be a soldier now, just like his father, unable to look at his hands and not see the blood dried in the lines of his palms, under his nails, unable to sleep without hearing the distorted screams of his crew over the radio as they were picked off, one by one.

Since his first mission, he asked himself if he could really blame James Cleven, who had seen what he had seen, except he had been on the ground and crawled back home. Could he ever hold it against him, that he had to drink to forget, for just a moment? Dying in war wasn't special. Wasn't memorable. But surviving, that was a punishment, a pit of hell opened wide, and Gale was only now learning how deep it went.

"John," he said softly.

"Buck."

"Let's see if Mickey's done with the car already tomorrow." His hand found his chest, pressing down against his dog tags and his cross. He was still staring at the white wall only inches away from his face.

"Tryin' to get rid of me already, huh?"

"No." He couldn't match John's teasing tone. When he didn't add

anything, he heard John padding over the floor and he turned out of habit to look at him.

John crouched down in front of his bed and studied Gale. “You think it’ll get worse if we drag this out,” he said after a moment. Gale didn’t move. He had always wanted to understand how easily John pulled his thoughts from his brain, like he had direct access to it, laying them out before him so he couldn’t run from them any longer.

“We gotta get over it eventually,” he said.

“Better to bite the bullet,” John agreed. Then, “War’s over.”

“War’s over,” Gale echoed.

They both had always known, of course, that men’s souls never truly came back from something like war.

In his dreams, Gale was a hunter. He stalked through the woods with a shotgun in his hands, darkness surrounding him, which was how he knew it wasn’t a memory. He was alone. Sometimes, he heard his father’s voice instructing him like he had when Gale was a boy, and sometimes it was voices calling out his name, begging for help, making him search for the source of it, except that there never was one.

He would shoot blindly, trying to shut it all out, and he’d hit the dead deer on the side of the road now sprawled across the soft bed of the forest floor, body contorted, staring at him with maggot-eyes, and he’d blink and it’d be John, blood pouring from his chest where Gale had hit him, opening his mouth to speak and no sound coming out, stumbling forward, desperate, a hand that was bones and rotten flesh stretched out towards him.

That was when he woke up.

Frantically, with his heart in his throat, he searched the small room until he found John sleeping across from him. He watched the rise and fall of his chest, trying to match his own breaths to it, reassuring himself that Bucky was not– not–

Gale turned so he was lying on his back, shirt clinging uncomfortably to his body covered in cold sweat. Against all odds, the two of them were still alive. They had dragged each other to the other side.

That was what mattered. Dreams were just dreams.

Chapter End Notes

RIP John Egan you would’ve loved Kesha

Chapter 5: Mirrors

Chapter Notes

> okay so. sorry i disappeared i really didn't mean to. my mental health is just really Not Great at the moment and Im honestly just glad to be getting by at the moment.
>
> I wrote most of this chapter literal months ago and the rest only now. I know its qualitatively one if not the worst of the ones already posted and i really apologise for that. i just thought it'd be nice to post this now cause i don't want anyone thinking i abandoned this baby. i won't.
>
> anyway, thank you for being here and thank you for you patience <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John was grinning down at him when Gale stirred awake, hands on his shoulders still shaking him like he might drift off again otherwise.

“I’m up, I’m up,” he muttered while rubbing his knuckles over his eyes.

John’s grin seemed to widen, if that was even possible. “Guess what?”

“What?”

“I called Mickey. He gave us the wrong date – car’s ready. We can go.”

Gale sat up so fast, he banged his forehead against John’s and made them both groan. “Fuck, sorry. You serious?”

“As a heart attack.”

“Okay. Alright.” The sun was barely up and he was already processing more information than his brain could handle without coffee. The back of his neck tingled like it did before missions, except this time it wasn’t merging with the anticipatory grief of losing a dozen men and more to German bullets, that he had eaten and slept and played cards with the weeks and months before. He was just excited. They were finally, *finally* catching up to the rest. Coming home. He almost missed their stupid faces. “Let’s go.”

***

Mickey threw the keys at Gale. He snatched them out of the air, momentarily distracted from staring at the black car he stood next to, parked on the side of the road. She was almost as boxy as the army jeeps they drove around in on the airfields, a few scratches in the paint alongside some dents on one side. Not the prettiest but she'd be more than enough.

"You soldier boys get up at awful hours," Mickey complained and leaned against the car, arms crossed, the muscles shifting under his skin. The city was barely coming alive around them, street lights having just flickered off.

(They were actually late. John had forgotten pretty much everything, running around the room looking for his sunglasses and almost missing to put on his shoes, which was only mildly amusing until Gale had to ask him four times whether he had his wallet on him or not.

"Stop nagging me, I'm not five," John had said. It wasn't very convincing when he was on his knees looking under the bed for a stray sock. How he had managed to throw his stuff just about anywhere in the short time they had stayed in the room was beyond Gale. You'd think years of military service taught him better.

"I wouldn't have to if you remembered where your head is for once."

"Ha! I could be dead and you'd still find an excuse to tell me what to do."

That Gale refused to comment and instead bent down, tilting his head to locate that damn sock to get them going.)

"Force of habit," John shrugged. He walked to one of the rear doors and pulled it open, throwing his backpack on the seats there. "Thanks for the help. Seriously."

"'S fine. Gotta support our heroes a little, don't I?"

Gale smiled weakly as he followed John to claim his spot in the driver's seat, except John closed the door with his shoulder as soon as he opened it an inch, putting his entire weight against it and raising

his brows at Gale as if to say, *don't you even dare.*

"I'm driving," Gale said.

"Nah, don't think so."

"I got the keys." He held them up, the ring holding them around his index finger.

"But you're not driving."

"Bucky."

"Buck."

"Move," Gale said in a tone he usually only used to order airmen around that couldn't tell top from bottom.

John leaned forward, head ducked, breath warm on Gale's skin, and pulled the corner of his mouth up into a smirk. He smelled of the aftershave they started sharing and the gum he stole from Gale, a sweet peppermint scent wafting around him. *"No."*

His hands twitched, searching for buttons and switches that weren't there. Abruptly, he stepped back and dropped the keys on the hood of the car. "You're a goddamn menace, you know that?"

John blew him a kiss as Gale rounded the vehicle to get to the passenger side.

Mickey cleared his throat. He almost forgot he was there. "The tank's full but she eats it fast. You might wanna stop halfway through to make sure you got enough."

"Will do." Gale slid into his seat and looked up at him. "If you want payment–"

"Yeah, yeah, shove that up your ass. I don't need anything from you. Just get outta my hair."

Gale nodded and shut the door. He relaxed into the seat, pulling out a toothpick to put in his mouth, John next to him already starting the engine while fiddling with the radio at the same time.

"Alright, cowboy, this is it."

Gale rolled his eyes. He spread out Crosby's map over his lap to play

navigator. “Just drive, idiot.”

“No final words? Nothing to help us part from the wonderful city that is Boston?”

“If I have to spend one more day here, I’m gonna go insane.”

John chuckled. Quiet music spilled out between them, a song he was half familiar with. “Amen.”

***

It took about forty-five minutes of trying to get out of Boston, the city morphing into suburbs and then scattered farms and villages, before John asked him, “you really sure you don’t wanna take a little detour?”

Gale turned his head to him, his side profile cast golden in the morning light. He had his sunglasses on. “Yes, Bucky, I’m sure.”

“I’m just sayin’–”

“Yeah, I know, I know. But I really wanna get home. Without a dressing down first for breaking every protocol in existence.” He thought of their fight and how much he did not want to have this conversation again. Some parts of it still stung like fresh cuts, even when the bruises had started to fade.

John kissed his teeth. Probably thinking the same. Looking for the easy way out. “Guess you got a point.”

Gale hummed, then said, “you didn’t mean it, though, did you? What you said about Marge?” He had to know. He wished he wouldn’t care about John’s opinion so much but he did, and he had to know his hell-raising boy of a best friend liked his saviour-girl. If they didn’t get along, what was there to hope for?

John smiled without taking his eyes off the road. Unsaid words were tucked into the lines around his mouth and Gale was almost getting used to this new expression he didn’t fully understand, no matter how much it scared him that there were parts of John he couldn’t reach. “I could never hate someone who makes you happy.”

“Thank you,” he said earnestly, softly, and wished so desperately that John would never forget how much this meant to him.

Outside, the world flew past, fields mixing with patches of forest, occasionally interrupted by grazing cattle. If Gale hadn’t known better, he’d think there never was a war at all. Everything looked so peaceful. That he had bombed the same landscapes to bits and pieces just half the world away almost seemed ridiculous.

He tried to imagine it: the smoke, the fires. Shrapnel piercing through flesh and concrete. Buildings collapsing like toy blocks. Did the people they killed scream? Or did death come too quickly for that? How many children did they bury under their own homes? How many mothers, sisters, uncles, cousins?

Would God ever forgive them for all they’d done? They had known, after all. They had known from the moment they flew across the Atlantic that all the glory the posters and instructors and movies promised was only a facade, that under it, their souls would rot inside the belly of a plane filled with bombs, that they’d grow sick with it.

Gale remembered running his hands over shot-up metal, tracing jagged edges trying to cut him like teeth, sunlight flickering through the holes. He remembered being so scared, more than he had ever been before, bile rising in his throat at everything he had seen and still thinking, *I want to fly.* Cause he didn’t regret it. Not one bit. Not ever. And that was somehow worse than everything else.

“Buck, can I ask you something?” John pulled him away from his thoughts, back to rural Massachusetts and the road carving a path through it.

“Always.”

“You– uhm–” John tapped his fingers on the steering wheel and bit his lower lip. “You love Marge.”

“I do,” Gale replied.

“But, like, how did you know that she was– the one. You wanna marry, I mean.”

Oh. This wasn’t what he expected, and for a moment he didn’t know what to say, his thoughts working sideways before finding their place again and he could translate them into actual words.

“Marge was the first person that ever saw me for me,” he began, smiling a little at the sugar-sweet memories rising to the surface. A fifteen years old Marge, with red dots all over her cheeks and dresses that were always slightly too big on her before she started filling them in. Her soft laugh that she only stopped covering with her hand when Gale told her how much he liked it. Bloodshot eyes she wouldn’t let anyone acknowledge when one of her brothers made her cry again but still demanded to be held for, burying her face in his shoulder behind the school so no one could see them. “Even when I wanted to give up on myself, she wouldn’t. She’s the strongest person I know. And the wisest. And the most stubborn – yes, even compared to you. She’ll move mountains before changing her mind. It was very hard not to fall in love with her.”

Gale could almost smell her perfume, flowers and caramel, almost feel her curls brushing against his throat when he’d pull her close, watch the light bounce off her painted nails. “You know, when I’m with her, everything just feels like it’ll be okay. That’s how I knew. It’s not– we still fight, but that’s not–”

“You *do?”* John sounded genuinely surprised.

“Let me finish my sentence, Jesus. Of course we fight. But that’s not the point. Marge could’ve left a thousand times and found someone else in a heartbeat, and I wouldn’t have blamed her.”

“But she didn’t.”

“She didn’t,” Gale agreed. “Cause loving her is more important than a quarrel.”

“Huh.” John considered that for longer than Gale was comfortable with, worrying his lip with his teeth again and really, he’d need to stop with that or it was going to look like he got beaten up, or kissed too hard. “Did you think about her when we were in the air?”

“Sometimes.”

A quick smile flitted across John’s face, there and then gone. *“Sometimes?* What kinda answer is *sometimes?”*

“Well, *sometimes,* you need to worry about other things than love. Like survival.”

“How romantic.”

“You want the truth or you want a pretty fantasy?”

“From you?” John touched the back of his hand to his forehead like a swooning princess. “I'll take anything at all, Major, as long as it’s you who says it.”

“Oh my God.” Gale rolled his eyes, though he was biting the inside of mouth to stop his smile.

Like the radio was paid to make fun of them, Frank Sinatra’s *Fools Rush In* started to play and John launched into it with enthusiasm, belting along to it so terribly off-key that Gale had no choice but to laugh, watching him dance as best as he could in his seat without crashing the car.

“Though I see the danger there,” John sang, reaching over to grab Gale’s shoulder and shake him a little, *“if there's a chance for me, then I don't care.”*

It was horrible and embarrassing but oh, Gale wouldn’t stop him for anything, if it meant John kept smiling like gold.

***

They passed through Worcester without issue, the traffic briefly thickening before it eased up again once they left the city far enough behind, the sun climbing higher and fighting to stay visible through thick grey clouds gathering on the horizon.

They were getting so close and Gale’s fingers itched with it, already imagining him and Bucky back among the troublemakers they called comrades. With how much their arrival had been delayed, he hoped Croz and Lemmons and Douglass had made it back before them after all, settling in until they could really get home, and letting the rest know that Buck-and-Bucky just took their sweet time.

He chewed on his toothpick, playing with it in his mouth, willing time to move and John to drive faster, right until John said, “I could eat.”

Gale almost screamed. Just a little. “We’ve got a little over two hours left. You’ll survive.”

“We didn’t have breakfast, we didn’t even have coffee, and when we get there, I can guarantee you we’ll miss lunch. It’s not good to drive when you’re hungry.”

“So we’ll switch. I drive.”

“Buck, come on, it’ll be thirty minutes at most. Plus, you remember what Mickey said about the car. Gotta make sure she’s gonna carry us all the way.”

Gale sighed. “Where would we even stop?”

His question got answered when John left the highway to follow a few signs into some tiny village he would never remember the name of, more forest rolling by until they were dropped right into lines of small houses and fields stretching wide, a small church in the middle like the people that had built this town had followed the instructions of a novel to place everything in ridiculously perfect order, a town square with a bar and a few shops attached to the church and spreading out into perfect roads with beautiful gardens.

The only glaring flaw was the complete lack of life. Not even a cat darted across the road as John found an empty spot to leave the car in.

“Where *is* everyone?” John asked before getting out, turning in a slow circle to survey their surroundings.

Gale followed and peered through a window into an empty grocery store, the lights turned off. It was early, but not early enough to make him believe they were all still sleeping. “Either we got lost in some parallel universe,” he said, “or we might want to try the church.”

“It’s not Sunday.”

“God doesn’t wait for anyone.”

John groaned but fell into step next to him, their shoes uncomfortably loud on the sidewalk. The church was more of a chapel, the walls wood that was painted white and the roof tilting towards the sky in a sharp angle, its tiles a reddish brown. A soft hum of organ music welcomed them the closer they got, some song Gale wasn’t familiar with, accompanied by voices singing along. His shoulders slumped in relief before he carefully pulled the heavy door open, the absence of incense assaulting his nose almost startling, and crossed himself while they stepped inside.

It took less than a second to understand why the entire town had decided to gather here: in front of the altar, grinning ear to ear, was a young couple holding hands while their community sang for them.

Gale swallowed a wince. They had run into a *wedding* of all things.

Ever the easy-going of the two, John was quick to sit down in the last row, nodding at the few people shooting them curious glances. Gale had no choice but to do the same.

“We should leave,” he whispered. The song came to an end.

“That’s rude,” John countered. “‘Sides, it’s nice to see a celebration that isn’t about war.”

Gale looked at the couple again, the suit and the white dress, their bright eyes, the flowers she was cradling in the crook of her elbow so she could hold on to him, and his heart sank when he thought of all the times they would get together for a party.

The 100th would celebrate anything – the mechanics getting a plane fixed a day before schedule, Meatball learning a trick, birthdays and anniversaries and that one time one of the boys was so relieved his girl left him for another man he paid for all their drinks, which made John laugh so hard he fell from his chair when he learned the whole story, soldiers returning and soldiers falling, family dying and friends saying hello, like when Hambone jumped through the barracks to show them all a letter he received of an old classmate reaching out all the way from his station in France.

And it was nice, it was evenings of bright laughter and the warmth of John’s shoulder pressing into his own, of the men they risked their lives with letting loose. But it never went without the reckless abandon of knowing that any moment could be their last. Not once could Gale watch Curt throw his head back at a joke and not imagine him doing the same as a bullet tore through his skull. Couldn’t forget that even Bucky, who he knew would never dare die without him, was only flesh and bones and luck was never on their side.

But this wasn’t England. These weren’t soldiers that were doomed by their country and their God and got back into a plane the next day, cause they were scared of dying but not really cause they knew when it came down to it, they wouldn’t be able to stop it and anyway, coming back alone was far worse.

Food forgotten, Gale let his arm brush against John’s, like it always

did, and watched the ceremony.

***

It took about two minutes of the freshly wed couple stepping outside to continue their celebration before Gale and John were cornered by a few older men wanting to know their business.

“Soldiers. Pilots,” one of them noted. “Bit odd for you to be here, no?”

John raised his hands, palms out, and smiled his sweetest smile. “Hey, now, we’re just passin’ through. We thought we could grab some lunch.”

The man considered the two of them, narrowing his eyes briefly, before coming to a decision and nodding towards the couple swarmed by the entire town trying to get in their congratulations. “Nothing’s open today. Got more important things. But I guess we can spare two seats at the table.”

Gale looked at John, trying to will him to simply get them back on the road, considering that it’d be a lot faster than whatever this was turning into, who looked back, entirely unmoved by the silent plea.

“That’d be great,” John said cheerfully, continuing to hold needlessly aggressive eye contact with Gale, “we appreciate it, really.”

From there on out, they fell into a pattern so familiar Gale didn’t even think about protesting, John befriending just about anyone they came across and him staying close, keeping them out of trouble. The boys often teased them for it, but Gale just couldn’t help it – from the moment he saw him, still growing into his adult body and too loud for his own good, John had been his responsibility. At first, it was out of sheer practicality, unwilling to get any avoidable punishments he wasn’t even at fault for, and from there it had morphed into a warm fondness mixed with a headache for the antics John could never stop himself from.

He’d never forget John’s wide eyes the first time he slipped under his arm to help him get back to the barracks without waking any of their superiors, taking the paths he knew would attract the least attention.

“Wait, hold on,” John had slurred, stumbling along as best as he could, “you’re– you’re the goody two shoes. Why would you– why are you good at this?”

Gale glanced at him sideways and couldn’t hide his smirk entirely. “I just got the brains they were conveniently out of stock when you were born.”

That was the first time he ever made John laugh and he had never forgotten the taste of it, that bit of sunshine in the middle of the night sliding between his teeth down his throat to settle there and fill his lungs with warmth.

He was convinced there was no one in this world easier to be around than John. He made it so easy, so comfortable to exist next to him, always a little too close to whomever he was listening to and always paying attention, like he didn’t even know just how much he filled out rooms with his sheer presence, how much air he could take up.

As Gale watched him, it became clear once again that everyone wanted to be friends with John. He never understood why John was so insistent on being friends with *him*.

He didn’t ask, of course, content to let John fall back at his side with a sigh and a grin, after they finally had something to eat and the champagne was being replaced with whiskey. It was a relatively chilly day with clouds only thickening but no one seemed to mind, too busy with the festivities to care about something as small as the weather.

“Ready to go?” Gale asked, already knowing the answer.

“Just a little longer.” John held up a thin leather bag kept close by a rubber band. “I asked for a smoke and he gave me this.”

“So?”

“Who doesn’t just have a pack on hand?”

Gale raised his brows and took the bag from him. “You never learned to roll your cigarettes?”

“No one does that,” John scoffed and crossed his arms as he watched Gale unfold the bag to find loose tobacco, paper and filters inside, all stored in their own little pockets.

“Hm. Must’ve gone out of fashion.” He pulled out one of the papers,

holding it between two fingers and sticking a filter to his lips. The tobacco was drier than he was used to and flakes of it landed on his pants while he spread it over the thin paper, gently pressing down as he rolled it between his fingers to shape it. He put the filter in, licked the top half of the paper and closed it like he had done a million times, then presented it to John, who blinked at him, dumbfounded.

“How do you know how to do that?” He took the cigarette from Gale and studied it, a small crease between his brows.

“My father hated packs.”

“Huh. Thanks.” John stuck the cigarette between his lips and lit it, making Gale smile to himself when he cursed at how fast the paper crumbled under the heat.

“You wanna teach me?” he asked after a few drags, words wrapped in a small cloud.

Gale shrugged. “Sure.”

John was terrible at it. He never got the position of his fingers right, the paper ripping or not staying tight enough around the filter before he got to close it, half the tobacco landing everywhere but inside the cigarette.

Gale laughed at his determined face the longer he went on unsuccessful, the stubborn crease between his brows he usually only had when he was flying.

“Stop, stop,” he said when John was about to rip another attempt in half. “Give me that.”

“Don’t laugh at me,” John grumbled but obliged.

“You make it so easy,” Gale shrugged and lifted the half-rolled cigarette to his mouth. “Now watch.”

John’s gaze fixed onto his lips as he dragged the tip of his tongue over the paper and wouldn’t quite leave even after he had glued it close neatly, holding it out to him.

“Not me, Bucky.”

John’s eyes snapped up to his and Gale could swear he could see a blush creeping over his cheeks. “Sorry.”

Gale waved him off. He always had a habit of getting distracted by the smallest things. “You got it now?”

He scratched the back of his head. “Show me again?”

***

By the time John had rolled a cigarette that was somewhat straight, heavy rain had started falling around them, only the edge of the roof they were hiding under shielding them from it. The rest of the party had opted to flee inside the only bar, leaving them alone to watch the world drown.

Faint music was floating around them, suspended in the air between the rhythm of the rain and the chaos of the voices inside.

“I never had a problem with storms until I got inside a plane,” John said between two drags. Half his face was illuminated by the window next to him, casting his cheekbones in a warm gold.

The wood of the wall behind him was pressing uncomfortably against Gale’s shoulder blades. Lightning flashed across the sky. A second later, thunder struck like a gunshot.

“Yeah,” Gale agreed and pretended neither of them had flinched.

A sharp laugh made them turn to the window, watching as the groom dipped his bride down before pulling her back to him and spinning her around the room to a lively tune. Somewhere throughout the day, he had lost his bow tie.

“I’ll never understand why you don’t dance,” John said without taking his eyes off the pair.

“Not everyone has to love it as much as you do.”

“Yeah, but it’s like– you *physically* recoil when someone mentions it, pal. You ever notice that?”

“I do *not,”* Gale sniped, the uncomfortable sensation of being seen creeping over his skin and leaving him feeling too exposed, like standing naked under the glaring sun to burn.

“No, I’m pretty sure you do.”

“That’s bullshit. I *like* dancing.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

John leaned in, squinting at Gale with his mouth pursed scanning his face for something only he could catch. “Then prove it.”

Gale blanched. “What.”

“You heard me.” With a saccharine smile, John stepped back and held out a hand obviously meant for him to take.

He shook his head, as if he was trying to wake himself up from a bad dream. John and hist stupid games. “No.”

“And here I thought Gale Cleven was a man of his word.”

“I am!”

“Doesn’t exactly look like it, does it?”

“Cause this is–”

“It’s what?” Before he could protest, John grabbed him and pulled Gale close, manhandling him into the position a woman should take up with one hand on John’s shoulder. John smiled down at him and said, “entertain me here a little, Buck. I’ve never seen you dance before.”

The rain was hitting them both full force now, running down their necks into their shirts. “We should just go inside and find someone–”

“That’s boring. Come on.”

He felt John trying to shift him and went along with it out of instinct, knowing his muscles would respond to John like a magnet no matter what his brain had to say about it, letting him lead them in a slow, careful loop.

“See?” John murmured when they repeated the motion. “I knew you could do it.”

“This was never about my dancing abilities or the lack thereof,” Gale

argued out of obligation, even though he was having a hard time staying focused. John was close. He was so goddamn close, a warm hand spanning over Gale's waist and holding him where he could smell their cologne and the smoke and see the creases along John's mouth when he smiled and the way his eyes lit up the easier Gale followed his steps.

He wasn't hearing any of the music any longer, too absorbed by John and how strange it was to have him in such detail. All of him was so familiar, and all of him seemed like Gale was truly discovering it for the first time.

This was what all the girls must think when John took them to bed, when he was above them and–

A hot ball tightened in his gut at the images rising to the surface, figments of his traitorous imagination he couldn't swallow and forget, cause John was still impossibly close and not close enough and he didn't ever need to be this close to Gale and Gale would never let him be anything but.

Was this why the boys would joke about them being married?

In a way, he understood better than ever what they saw.

More steps. The loops turning tighter, faster. *A waltz,* Gale realised far too late. John had them waltzing together.

Something about that idea was so absurd to him that he dipped his head down and laughed against John's shoulder clad in wet leather he could taste on his tongue and feel under his fingers. He wasn't cold. Almost the opposite.

"What?" John asked, clearly amused, but wouldn't let them break their rhythm.

"Nothin'," Gale said and let him complete another turn, the hand on his waist tightening for a second.

It was good – so good, so easy, like they had done this a million times before, that Gale didn't even notice at first when John changed the tempo to match the new song, entirely content to keep dancing with him forever.

"It doesn't hurt you, you know," John said softly against his ear, "letting yourself be visible."

Gale tripped, maybe over his own feet or maybe over John's he wasn't sure, abruptly stepping back to blink hard and find immediate discomfort when he registered wet hair glued to his forehead and every piece of clothing soaked through, goosebumps rising on his skin to remind him that he wasn't untouchable, not even with John at his side.

Thunder rumbled across the sky.

"I'm gonna need a drink," John blurted, eyes wide, almost like he hadn't meant any of it, and something about that idea made Gale's insides pull tight until he felt close to throwing up.

He'd need one, too.

Chapter End Notes

so like a while ago i had a friend of mine ask me "hey who the fuck is that carrion you mention in the title" and i (very much laughing) was violently reminded that most people aren't obsessed with mr hozier and might not know this word even existed. said friend (hi baby, i didn't forget!) told me it's a good idea to give you a quick imagination so that's what we're gonna do now. Buckle up kids, time to rant about the silly details i think too much about. if you don't want my analysis on this that's super chill, just ignore this.

carrion is the decaying flesh of dead animals. maybe you noticed Gale mentioning flesh and blood and bones and organs quite a few times throughout the chapters, making the body as physical as it gets on a linguistic level by talking about the parts its made of. He even compares to a dead deer to dead soldiers cause out in the world, in death, we're all just rotting flesh. So carrion's memory is the fallen men and the war they can't quite leave behind. you try to forget, but memories live inside you. especially the ugly ones. and they make you fall back into mechanisms that protect you and made you survive but might not offer the kindest solutions (this makes more sense later on in connection to 'make your bed' just trust). then you have this aspect of carrion being animal's flesh specifically and trying to overcome something by reducing and downplaying it (turning a person into a dead body that might as well be a rotting deer on the side of the street) and not being able to. the irony of memory being a haunting. then the obvious thing of carrion being kind of really gross and war being really gross. both epigraphs pick up these themes actually! the

beyoncé lyrics even go as far as to make sure to remind you that for gale, it's not just the war that's stuck in his bones, it's also his father and the way he grew up.
but anyway, what do i know

thanks for reading! <3

Chapter 6: Returns

Chapter Notes

shorter than usually but i thought y'all might enjoy an update :)

there's this lyric from one of my favourite songs that goes "Weißt du noch als wir in die Tische ritzten in den Schulen / Bitte Herr vergib ihnen nicht, denn sie wissen was sie tun" (Do you remember when we carved into the tables at school / Please Lord don't forgive them, for they know what they're doing) i keep coming back to that

ANYHOW it's actually really hard to write Gale like this cause I can't let him have the full realisation yet but also he's not an idiot, just blind to the full depth of his emotions, so here we are

i hope i can finally study for my russian exam that i got tomorrow lol this chapter ended up being a bit of a procrastination project

also, please PLEASE don't think i dont see/ignore your comments cause i'm shit at replying to them atm!!! I see and am delighted by each one!!! My mental health still just isn't where i want it to be and this is one of things that get really hard to do – still, thank you for your well wishes and your thoughts on my silly writing, i am overjoyed by them <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The base was surprisingly empty for supposedly housing a few thousand soldiers that were trapped there until the paperwork was through, the few people they did meet shooting them strange looks for their lack of uniforms, though most of their frowns smoothed into mild confusion once they recognised their sheepskins.

Gale nodded at them but couldn't muster up a smile. Ever since the– the *dancing,* and how fucked did that sound, everything felt strange between John and him.

Which he *hated* with every fibre of his being.

Even when they had fought, he had never felt this off-kilter. Like he was slipping towards an edge and about to fall, his heart thundering in his chest as retaliation for being trapped inside it.

Every step felt heavy, thickening the silence that had fallen over them. Gale kept glancing at John and his unreadable expression, and he knew John was looking at him too, felt his eyes burning into his skin.

They had been sober. Everything that had happened, that had been their choices, their mistakes.

Gale had started reciting prayers the moment he saw John's mouth close around a beer bottle and not set it down until it was empty. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jacket, mirroring John cause they were, after all, too close not to steal habits, and refused the urge to touch the cross around his neck for reassurance.

If God hadn't abandoned him already like a father turning his back on a disobedient son, he sure was standing on thin ice. He'd have to find the nearest church and repent for the *something* that was wrong with him. Like someone had taken his head and screwed it on backwards. And he couldn't blame Bucky for it, cause nothing ever felt like a mistake with him and that wasn't his fault. Only after would Gale find that knot in his stomach, the need to fold his hands together and ask for forgiveness on his knees.

Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now, and at the hour of our death.

Signs pointed them towards the mess hall and they followed, Gale chewing on a toothpick and John worrying his lower lip. Their clothes still weren't dry, his heels chafing uncomfortably against the inside of his wet boots.

They paused in front of the grey double doors for a moment, the sickly white light bouncing off the bleak walls making Gale's eyes sting. The faint sound of cutlery clicking against each other and too many voices speaking at once reached them, alongside the smell of food with too much salt.

It was John who broke first, putting a hand against the door and pushing without looking at Gale once, the volume increasing immediately and snippets of loose conversation floating over to them.

Gale stepped inside a second later, eyes roaming over the long lines of tables seating too many men at once, their elbows knocking against each other with every slight movement. It was a sea of uniforms and neat hair, Gale trying and failing to pick out anyone familiar. He wanted to be relieved. To feel accomplished at the fact that they had made it, finally, and be freed from the stones sitting on his chest. But he couldn't. Not when John wouldn't talk to him.

They were starting to get noticed, with their jeans and unkempt strands falling into their foreheads, the chatter first turning into murmurs, soldiers pointing the two of them out to their neighbours, then silence spreading until it was almost dead quiet.

The crowd stared at them. John and Gale stared back.

Then someone got up, a grin splitting their face, and *oh,* Gale felt his shoulders fall, it was Crosby, alive and healthy and *smiling,* spreading his arms as he approached them. “Look what the cat dragged in,” he said, squeezing Gale’s hand tight in a warm welcome.

“Croz,” John said, the same airy delight in his voice Gale felt at seeing him again. “Croz, how are you?”

“I should ask you that. You two look *rough,* Jesus.”

“We ran into a few complications,” Gale said slowly.

“And swam through a river, apparently. We were getting worried – been waiting on you for days. Whatever the hell the two of you were up to, all of us really just should’ve stayed with old Rupert.”

Gale chose to ignore the needle poking at his ribs. Instead, he said, “I’m glad you made it safe and sound. How are the others?”

“Peachy. Oh, right–” Croz turned back to the overstuffed room and gestured at John and Gale. “Majors Gale Cleven and John Egan of the 100th, everyone. The two best pilots you’ll ever come across.”

At that, Gale and John actually did exchange an amused look, the reaction so instinctive neither thought about resisting.

“Majors Pain-In-My-Ass one and two,” a voice pulled their attention towards their left, where Chick was glowering at them, shaking his head for good measure, though the slight quirk of his lip betrayed him. Around him, the rest of their crew sat and seemed just as delighted to see them as Croz was, Douglass lifting two fingers to his temple to shoot them a quick salute. “And just about the only pilots who’d manage to crash a plane on the last goddamn metres. You had a nice trip?”

John strode towards them immediately, the rest of the soldiers slowly shaking off the silence to return to their eating and talking. “Yes, Sir,” he said and smiled at them all, everything about his expression so *fond,* and Gale had to turn his gaze away, cause it was for everyone

except him.

“Good.” Chick inspected the two of them carefully, almost making Gale squirm with how intensely he searched their faces with his eyes. Did he know? Was it obvious?

A moment later, he had to ask himself: *What* exactly would be obvious?

“Well, it’s good to know you’re okay. Now go get something to eat and then let yourselves get checked out after.” After another long beat, he finally released them with a familiar, “dismissed.”

Gale didn’t manage to swallow a single bite, despite the hole in his stomach.

The doctor said they were alright, just a little underweight, and Gale almost laughed cause he was pretty sure that was the diagnosis for everyone who wasn’t in the middle of bleeding out.

A glance in the mirror revealed he was right, though, his shirt left on the examination table from when the doctor pressed a stethoscope to his heart to make sure it was still beating.

He never really paid much attention to his body aside from keeping it strong enough to carry him. But now he *looked,* and he saw his ribs and the nubs of his spine pushing against his skin, saw fading bruises, saw scars that were still pink. He had showered before he let anyone examine him, scrubbing off the same dirt he felt he carried since he crashed over Bremen.

But he didn’t feel clean. If anything, with no additional smudges and no dried blood to cover the worst of it, he felt even dirtier. Exposed, for everyone to see just where the war had left its claw marks.

Gale looked up to catch John in the mirror, shirtless as well and looking just as wrung out, which was almost worse. Someone as strong, as sun-burning as Bucky, shouldn’t look like that. His dog tags rested on his sternum, alongside a cross Gale had never paid much attention to, except that it was gold instead of silver and John had told him he didn’t trust the one who died on it any longer.

John was the first to turn away.

The entire surviving 100th caught them on their way to the respective rooms they had been assigned, falling over them like a hoard of children. Their questions overlapped, making it impossible to answer a single one, hands reaching out to squeeze their shoulders and pat their backs and ruffle their hair.

They must've been quite the sight, blocking almost half the hallway with just how *many* of them were still there and wanted to welcome John and Gale back.

Gale wished nothing more than to crawl under his covers and sleep for the next century but he indulged them, trying his best not to sound rude when all he offered was brief replies. John was already telling the lengthy stories right next to him, anyway, so it didn't really matter.

It still stung, though, when Gale realised just how much John was cutting out, or changing, and he almost called him out for it, except, what would he say?

Why aren't you telling them you got so drunk you fell into my bed and forgot that you slept with your nose buried in my chest all night? Why aren't you telling them you flirted with me so much, I almost forgot I was no dame? Why aren't you telling them we danced together in the rain?

Why are you pulling away from me, when it was you who started this?

Before he could do anything to stop it, they were entirely separated, surrounded by their own bubbles, and Gale couldn't remember this ever happening before. He frowned to himself, trying hard to listen to a story a Sergeant he couldn't recall the name of was telling him and failing spectacularly. He just nodded, hoping no one would prod, fighting the urge to look over his shoulder to find John laughing like always.

He needed to fix this. He didn't know how to fix this. How the fuck would he even start that conversation?

All he knew for certain was that he hated the distance between them

and wanted it to stop. He wanted to talk to John like he always did, and listen to his stupid jokes. He wanted to feel his shoulder push into his own again. He wanted–

He didn't want to lose John over something he could hardly articulate, beyond that it made him feel heavy.

Lemmons nudged him slightly with his elbow, raising a brow in a quiet question. Gale shook his head, *doesn't matter.*

Some of the soldiers that had fought and survived Bremen were telling the ones that came after about Bucky and him before they were captured, stories he hadn't heard in so long turning his heart into a useless weight threatening to crush his insides.

Had they really been that carefree, once upon a time? So unmarked by the war, despite standing in the middle of it?

Bile rose in his throat before Curt came up, and threatened to spill over at the first mention of his name.

Gale excused himself and strode down the corridor as fast as he could without breaking into a run, the hands in his pockets balled into fists. He didn't know where he was going – he just needed to get away.

It wasn't John he felt at his side when he rounded the corner. It was Rosie, who he was glad to see and wanted to scream at in equal measure.

"Major," Rosie said quietly, so different from the kid that had asked him about tips on how to survive the sky turning into hell, "do you need anything?"

Gale was pretty sure he was losing his mind. He didn't slow down. "No, Rosie, but thank you for asking," he said, slightly raspy and still steady, because Gale Cleven did not break. Especially not in front of others.

The dismissal must've been obvious. Rosie smiled at him before he stopped. "Alright then. But–" he reached into his breast pocket and pulled out an envelope, holding it out to Gale, who had to walk back a few steps to take it. "From your girl. Arrived a few days ago."

Marge. His sweet Marge had written to him. Gale ran a thumb over the address on the back, the loops of her handwriting he had held onto like a lifeline when there had been nothing else. "Thank you," he said

softly.

“Of course. I’m glad to have you back, Buck.”

My lovely soldier boy,

I wish I could abide by your request, but the truth is, I’m always worried about you. If it weren’t for Bucky, I would fear for your sanity every second of the day. It is difficult to have witnessed what one war has done to my father without fearing this one will change you, too.

But I do not want this letter to reek of misery.

I was delighted to receive your note. You know, all of us women, we’re so impatient to get our soldiers back to us. Especially now that you’re so close, and still so far. Everyday I grow more impatient with wanting to see you – it is truly unbearable, my betrothed. I’m tired of loving you from across the world.

I tell myself: You are safe, you are alive, and that is what counts. But I’m a selfish girl, you know I am, and it is not enough. I want to hold you. I want to see your smile again. I want to kiss you.

I want to marry you and then watch wrinkles sink into your skin, and fight over whose hair has gone greyer.

Hurry, and don’t be scared to come home to me. I love you. I miss you.

All my love and adoration,

Your Marge

Chick called them into his office before dinner, sitting them down with Crosby at his side to have them tell him exactly what happened.

This time, it was Gale who gave him a clean depiction of their journey, leaving out all the important details, their trip to Harvard

and the wedding, how John's hand felt spread over his waist and that he always smelled slightly of smoke.

Every word he spoke only made him feel more like a fraud, like the biggest fucking liar on this planet, and a man like that, who couldn't look at his best friend anymore, sure as hell didn't deserve a place in heaven.

By the time he stopped talking, his eyes were burning.

This was worse than losing their boys in combat. At least there, they'd just be gone from one moment to the next, grabbed from the sky never to be seen again. But John was right next to him, sitting in an uncomfortable plastic chair close enough to make their elbows brush. He was alive. He just didn't want to talk to Gale.

Even Chick seemed to notice something was off, a frown tugging at him as he told them once more that he was glad they were back and, for the love of God and his own sanity, never to break protocol like this again. At the end, they were sitting in silence, Crosby standing off to the side and looking confused.

"Majors," Chick said slowly, "nothing did happen to you, did it?"

"No, Sir," Gale and John said at the same time, their voices equally devoid of any real emotion.

"Well." Chick cleared his throat. Gale had never seen him quite this uncomfortable before. "Well, alright." He seemed to chew on something for a moment, shifting in his seat, then clearing his throat again. Finally, he said, "you boys know how much the others look up to you. Big hole there whenever the two of you decide to go rogue. Which, and I really gotta tell you this again, before it becomes a pattern, *stop*. Anyway, what I'm saying is– whatever it is that's happening here, you gotta– we don't have time for it. Not now. You get that, don't you? It's nothing personal. Just do your jobs and put on a face, and you'll be home before you know it. Then it's… war is over, is all."

"Yes, Sir," they repeated, Gale sounding small to his own ears. Chick was right, of course. They couldn't afford to lose morale when they only had a few days, maybe weeks left. And it was Gale's and John's job to make sure that wouldn't happen.

Outside, Gale turned to John. It was almost unbearable. Everything inside him was on fire, urging him to set this right, to undo whatever

happened. He couldn't live with John so far from him. "Bucky, do we need to talk?"

John smiled at him, the expression so hollow, it almost had Gale flinch. "I'm okay."

That was a lie so blatant Gale almost didn't know what to do with it. When had they stopped being honest with each other?

"John–"

"I'm sorry. Really."

Gale reared back, too hot and too cold at the same time. This was what he wanted, wasn't it? An apology? And offer to go back to how things were?

Then why did it make everything hurt so much more?

In the end, all he could force out was, "yeah. Me, too."

For the first time, they ate their dinner at different tables. Croz sat with John. Rosie with Gale. The world didn't make sense to him anymore.

His room was cold and empty and he couldn't keep his eyes closed, no shuffling but his own there to calm him, no clothes thrown haphazardly all over the floor making him stumble when he got up to take a piss.

For some reason, he had been given a single room, and after years of sharing his sleeping quarters with at least ten others, he couldn't relax in the quiet.

In truth, it scared him. Silence meant death. Silence meant a storm was waiting.

A part of him, buried deep down, knew the knock would come. Hoped it would. He startled anyway when he saw John on the other side of the door, curls loose and a pillow under his arm.

“Can’t sleep,” he whispered.

Gale nodded. “Me neither.”

It was the most normal conversation they had all day and Gale was grateful for it like a beggar stumbling after a penny, his breath coming easier and the headache pounding at his temples ebbing away when he stepped aside to let John in. “You okay with the floor?”

“Yeah. Just don’t wanna be alone, is all.” John dropped his pillow to the floor and followed a moment after, crossing his legs under himself.

“I don’t have a spare blanket,” Gale said.

“Don’t worry about that.”

“You’ll be cold.” Slowly, he climbed back into his bed, unsure whether just to throw his blanket at John or keep it.

“I’ve been colder.”

At Gale’s frown, John laughed. The sound just for him. “Really, Buck, it’s okay. I just need someone else breathing beside me.”

“Okay.” He rearranged himself, turning to his side so he faced John, who was lying on his back with his hands resting on his stomach. His eyes were closed. “Goodnight.”

John breathed deep. “Goodnight.”

Chapter End Notes

> RIP Gale Cleven you would’ve loved having Shameless US as your first exposure to queer representation in media

End Notes

My cursed head canon for today is that 21st century Bucky would have a tattoo of a unicorn on his ass he got after he lost a bet. Everyone tried to talk him out of it. He did not budge. My daily unpopular take is that Clegan is INSANELY Olivia Rodrigo coded, specifically the GUTS album. I'm right it's okay you can admit it

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